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HER GUARDIAN'S SACRIFICE; OR, A NAME IN THE BALANCE.

BY SARA CLAXTON,

AUTHOR OF "WHICH WAS THE WOMAN?" "FOR HER DEAR SAKE," "LEAP YEAR," ETC., ETC.



"HE BURIED HIS FACE ON THE BACK OF THE SEAT."

Her Guardian's Sacrifice;

OR,

A NAME IN THE BALANCE.

BY SARA CLAXTON,

AUTHOR OF "UNDER A CLOUD," "A WOMAN'S WITCHERY," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

UNWELCOME NEWS.

"WHAT is amiss, Launce?"

The query came from a delightful old lady, the very picture of a high-bred aristocratic matron, and evidently the mother of the handsome man at the opposite end of the table whom she addressed. An artist would have gloried in that wainscoted room, with its deep bay windows bordered with clustering wistaria and roses, through which the sun was pouring a golden flood of light on to the well-appointed table and the two *distingue* personages seated there.

Both were worthy of attentive study. The firm, erect figure, the well-set, proudly-carried head, the strong mouth and keen-gray eyes of the mother, were exactly reproduced in the son, a man in the prime of life, with an unmistakable air of breeding and refinement. Just now he was neglecting the good cheer piled on his plate while he read and re-read the letter laid out before him.

His mother had to repeat her question before gaining an answer. Then, slowly refolding and replacing the letter in its envelope, he said:

"I am afraid more is amiss for you, mother, than for me. This letter is to tell me of poor Trescott's death."

"Poor fellow! I am sorry. But how can it affect me so nearly? I have not seen him since his marriage."

"Don't you remember my telling you of the visit he paid me in town last spring when he asked me to be guardian to his daughter? I hesitated at first, but he was so earnest about it and looked so troubled and care-worn that I had not the heart to refuse. Had I thought I should have had to enter on my responsibilities so soon, I am afraid that I should not have been so easily persuaded."

"I remember quite well," she said. "But we can send the girl to school or let her remain with her relations. She will not be in our way."

"I am afraid she will," he said, gravely. "Poor Trescott, I know, understood that she should be received into our house. He had a great horror of boarding-schools, and a still greater one of her seeing much of her mother's people. He has always kept her with him; indeed, she was his only companion for many years, and he begged me, almost with tears, to take charge of her if he should die, and leave her unmarried."

"And you promised to do so?"—with an air of dignified astonishment.

"I did. It will be a troublesome job; for, from the little I saw of the girl, I fear she is the true daughter of Annette L'Estrange. In face she resembles her exactly."

"Heaven grant you may be wrong! I never thought that I should have to welcome her child to my house, but if you have passed your word, Launce, that settles the matter. The girl must come here. When am I to expect her?"

That was Mrs. Staunton entirely. Disagreeable as it might be, she would have suffered anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of Launce's acting in accordance with the dictates of honor. But he knew that she felt it just as much as another woman who would have vented her vexation in querulous complaints.

"I do not know yet," he said, in answer to her question. "I shall have to go down at once to the city for the funeral, and expect she will return with me. I will speak to her first, and try to make her understand that she will have to submit to authority here."

"You had better leave her to me," said Mrs. Staunton, quietly. "It might only rouse a spirit of rebellion to begin with. I shall do my best to get on with her."

She sighed involuntarily, and it did not escape the quiet ear of her son any more than the regretful glance cast around on the quiet, orderly room, so soon to be desecrated by a hoyden of sixteen, escaped his observant eye.

It troubled him, for he knew such an advent must bring an element of discomfort into the calm, happy life that these two had led together

for so many years, and that the discomfort would be even greater for his mother than for himself.

Launce Staunton was now thirty-five years old, and during those thirty-five years he had been master of Fairholm. He had come as the companion of his widowed mother, when, after twelve years of married life, her husband had been taken from her just too soon to welcome the long-desired heir. It was therefore small wonder that Launce was all in all to her; but yet, Mrs. Staunton had never been foolishly idolatrous in her love. No selfish yielding to the natural yearning to keep him at her side prevented her sending him to college when the time came for him to learn independence among his fellows. Not only in her sight must her darling be brave and wise; he must also be able to command the respect and admiration of others.

Neither had she murmured when Launce, wounded by the thoughtless play of Annette L'Estrange, had wandered far from his own country and wrestled with his sorrow alone. It was for his good, and that was paramount in her eyes. There was much of the stoic in her nature, and what was inevitable, or even only expedient, she bore with unflinching mood.

But indeed it was no small sacrifice that he asked from her now, for not only was the thought of the coming of the new inmate distasteful to her as that of a spoiled, wayward girl is sure to be to a sedate old lady unused to be disturbed, but also this unwelcome comer was one who could in no case have been otherwise to her.

If there is one person in the world against whom a woman may justifiably harbor resentment, it is against the one who has trifled with the heart of her son; and that is what Annette L'Estrange had done with Launce.

He had met her when he was a boy of eighteen and she a girl of twenty, but in knowledge of the world far more than two years his senior. An incorrigible flirt, she had been unable to resist the temptation of alluring the handsome, clever boy to her feet; then proudly and happily he had lingered till the fair dream was dispelled by the tidings of her engagement to his oldest and truest friend, John Trescott.

Maddened by jealousy and despair, he had gone abroad, and remained away for some years, until the old passion had died out and he could come back without fearing to meet either John Trescott or his wife. Ah, well, it had happened happily for him; and when he had again looked into the brave, good face of his friend and read the traces of disappointment there, he knew that his love had been still more worthless than he had thought.

The frivolous, selfish nature had ill-repaid all John Trescott's love and chivalrous care. She had got tired of him and had not scrupled to show it, or to seek the company of others whose feelings were more in unison with her own nature.

To regain her love, he had tried to interest himself in her occupations, and failing to raise her to his level, had attempted to sink to hers—with what result to the noble-hearted man may be imagined; and Launce had sorrowed for his friend when, after ten years of the hard struggle, the young wife had died and left her husband alone with the one daughter whom she had done her best to make like herself.

Nearly six years had passed since then, and now death had come once more, and Nora Trescott was orphaned. Launce Staunton was the guardian of the daughter of the woman whom he had once loved. That love had been dead long ago, but he had never loved any one since.

He would say cynically that such women as his mother were too few for him to come across a second specimen, so that they two must be contented with one another; and if Mrs. Staunton ever regretted his decision at all, it was only with a bitter recollection of the girl who had so crushed all the fervent affection that he was possessed of.

CHAPTER II.

HIS WARD.

MRS. STAUNTON was, however, to enjoy a short respite, for Launce did not bring his ward back with him.

"She is dreadfully cut up," he said, "and begged to be allowed to stay for a time with her friends, the Trevors; and as they seemed anxious to have her, I have left her there for a month."

"She is conscious of her loss, then?"

"Painfully. There was an awful scene at the funeral. I thought she would have flung herself in after the coffin."

"How shocking! Why did you allow her to go?"

"She promised to restrain herself, and really tried, but it proved too much for her, poor child!"

"She ought never to have gone. Self-restraint would be the last thing to expect from her."

But though she spoke severely, her heart softened toward the grief-stricken girl. At any rate, she was in trouble, and would need kindness and attention to make up for her great loss; and how much easier it is to feel charitably disposed to the suffering than to the happy and prosperous!

But in spite of these softened feelings, the month which intervened seemed a very short one, and it was with a feeling that something unpleasant was about to happen that Mrs. Staunton awoke on the day fixed for Nora Trescott's arrival. She herself drove to the station to meet her expected visitors; for, at any rate, she had resolved that even if affairs did not go right, no blame should attach to her.

"And after all," she reflected, as they drove along the pretty shady lanes, "she is also John Trescott's daughter, and he died trusting in Launce's promise. It would ill become Launce's mother to disappoint such confidence."

Unfortunately, Mrs. Staunton was fated to receive a bad impression at the commencement. Miss Trescott had not arrived.

"Are you sure, John?" she asked of the footman who brought the tidings.

"I looked at every one who came off the train, ma'am, but there wasn't any one for Fairholm."

"When is the next train due?"

"Not until eight o'clock in the evening!" So the only thing to be done was to drive away, and send again. Mrs. Staunton was greatly annoyed; for, the soul of punctuality herself, she could not tolerate a want of it in others. But when the carriage returned for a second time empty, she began to grow seriously alarmed.

"Some accident must have happened, Launce," she said, uneasily.

"I think not," he answered. "You see the trains have arrived quite punctually, and if anything had happened the other side, the Trevors would have telegraphed. At any rate, we shall hear from them in the morning, as I told John to telegraph if Miss Trescott did not come by this train."

"Do you mean to say, then, that Miss Trescott can have postponed her journey without informing us of the fact?"

"I am afraid she must have done so. Perhaps her heart failed her at the last moment."

"If so, it is unpardonable."

"It is certainly very remiss; but remember she is very young, and may have forgotten."

"I hope, for the sake of my good opinion, that you are wrong. I shall not allow such behavior when Miss Trescott is an inmate of my house!"

And Mrs. Staunton worked at her knitting as though she was fashioning Nora Trescott's future conduct while she manipulated the wool with her firm white fingers. At all events, the comparison suggested itself to Launce, and he could not help asking himself how the experiment would answer.

They had sat almost silent for more than an hour, when Mrs. Staunton exclaimed:

"Hark, Launce! I hear wheels on the drive. Can it be Miss Trescott at this time of night?"

"Surely not; there is no train. But it may be tidings!"

The wheels stopped at the front door. Then came a ring, a slight bustle, the door was opened, and the butler announced:

"Miss Trescott!"

"Did you not think I was lost?" she cried, as she entered, while both Mr. and Mrs. Staunton looked up in astonishment. Was it possible that this voluble young lady, who was as much at her ease as though she had known them for years, was the grief-stricken girl who, only four weeks ago, had almost flung herself into her father's grave?

"A true daughter of Annette L'Estrange!" was Mrs. Staunton's mental comment. "Shallow-hearted and unstable as water!"

"How do you do, Mr. Staunton? You are Mrs. Staunton, I know," putting up a pair of rosy lips to be kissed. "Have I frightened you very much? Will said you would think that we had eloped."

"We had not imagined that contingency; but we were very anxious," said Mr. Staunton; while his mother coolly returned Nora's embrace, and inquired the cause of the delay.

"I forgot to change at the Junction, and was carried on to Marstown. We never noticed until we were steaming out of the station, and as it was an express, I could not get out before. So there I was, landed at an odd, out-of-the-way little place, where I had to wait nearly four hours for a train to take me back to the Junction. Then when I got there I found the last train had left, and had to go to the hotel to get a hack in which I drove over here."

"But how came you to make such a mistake?"

"We were laughing and talking so much that we did not notice the name."

"Who was with you, then?"

"Agnes and Will Trevor. Will wanted to come back with me, but I wouldn't let him. I thought I should get another train later, and Agnes didn't want him to leave her."

"But surely your maid was with you?" said Mrs. Staunton.

"No, she wasn't. Her mother is ill, so she has gone for a few weeks' holiday."

"Then you came all this distance alone?"

"Of course I did. It was better to come alone than to stay until you sent some one to come with me. But I will tell you what I did. I telegraphed to Mrs. Trevor, because I thought you would telegraph to her when you found that I did not come, and that she would be anxious. Am I not thoughtful, now?"

"It would have been more to the purpose," said Mr. Staunton, smiling, "if you had shown your thoughtfulness in coming right in the first instance."

"I suppose it would; but I can assure you I managed beautifully. It was rather fun, and I should have enjoyed it had I not feared you would be frightened."

"Your independence has stood you in good stead this time," said Mrs. Staunton. "But I am surprised to hear you speak so. Such adventures are highly undesirable for young ladies."

Nora's rosy lips wreathed into a slightly contemptuous smile, but she persistently ignored the disapprobation, and continued chatting as she followed her hostess to the room prepared for her reception.

"I will send my maid to you," said Mrs. Staunton; "and when you are ready you will find some supper in the dining-room."

"Thanks; I am almost famished. I ordered some dinner at Ridgeway, but there was no private room vacant, and every one stared at me so that I couldn't eat when it came."

"Miss Trescott has evidently overcome her grief," said Mrs. Staunton, as she returned to her son. "You were right; she is like her mother."

"Don't let us judge her hastily, mother."

"Such behavior and uncontrollable spirits would be unseemly at any time. How much more so when her father has not been dead six weeks!"

Launce did not answer, and in a few moments the culprit returned, looking so radiantly lovely that he could not but feel attracted by her beauty, even though he was repelled no less than his mother by her seeming heartlessness.

"Can she really have forgotten?" he reflected as he watched the bright brown eyes take in a rapid survey of her new surroundings. According to all strict laws of beauty those eyes ought to have been blue, for Miss Trescott was a thorough blonde, fair and golden-haired.

But no; contrary in this, as in all else, she possessed the most perfectly-colored hazel eyes, shaded with dark lashes, which contrasted rather than harmonized with her dazzlingly creamy white skin and golden hair. She was small and graceful, with delicately molded features and a wealth of wavy hair, which seemed to vie in willfulness with its owner.

Launce was taking in all the details of the little black-robed figure, as she was doing of the handsome old wainscoted room.

"It is a lovely old place!" she exclaimed. "I know I shall like it immensely!"

"I am afraid you will find it very dull," said Mrs. Staunton.

"Oh, no, I sha'n't; I am never dull! I shall explore all round, and make friends with everything and everybody. Have you plenty of animals and dirty, curly-headed children?"

"We have horses, dogs and cats," said Mrs. Staunton, looking amused; "but the other animals are not kept on the premises."

Nora laughed. "Don't you, really? I shall have to introduce them among other pets."

"I hope, if you interest yourself in the poor of our village at all, that you will aid me in promoting cleanliness among the women," said Mrs. Staunton.

"Poor things! they have such a lot to do; and children do look so happy in their dirt! It is cruelty to animals to be continually washing them!"

Supper was announced, much to Launce's relief, who saw that his mother's disapproval was growing.

Luncheon was on the table; but as Launce joined his mother, he found her alone. "Where is Miss Trescott?" he asked.

"I have seen nothing of her since breakfast. She went into the garden, and has not been in since."

"Did you not tell her our luncheon hour?"

"Certainly not! I had no idea of her staying out there all the morning. Besides, the bell has rung. If she is in the grounds, she must have heard, and ought to have understood what it meant."

"You must give her a little lecture on punctuality. I am afraid, mother mine,"—laying his arm affectionately on her shoulder—"that I have brought a very disturbing element into your life."

"It is no use regretting the inevitable. The only thing to be done is to endeavor to alter the effects of her bringing up."

Launce sighed. Somehow he could not help thinking that his mother took a wrong view of the case.

"Ah, here comes the truant!" he cried, as Nora appeared bounding over the lawn, followed by two immense hounds. "She is not unprotected, after all, you see, having taken upon herself to liberate Boss and Tartar. Certainly Miss Trescott seems to look upon the place with an air of proprietorship."

Perhaps there was no one else about the place who would have taken upon themselves to do such a thing without permission. The dogs were Launce's peculiar property, and every one knew his peculiarities too well to take liberties with them.

Mrs. Staunton said nothing, and only raised her head, with a look of cold inquiry, as, a few minutes later, Nora entered the room, laden with an immense bunch of autumn leaves and berries.

"I have had such a glorious walk!" she cried.

"See what I have brought you back!"—presenting her offering to Mrs. Staunton.

"Thank you! John,"—to the footman—"will you kindly put them in water?"

Nora's lips curved contemptuously. She was not accustomed to have her offerings thus received, and her thoughts flew back to the wildflower excursions of the past, when she and her companion had dwelt so lovingly over all their merits, both artistic and scientific.

Her ardor was still further cooled when Mrs. Staunton continued: "Our luncheon hour is one, and it is now nearly two."

"I am so sorry to be late," said Nora, penitently, "but I forgot to ask the time."

"Were you out of sound of the bell?"

"Of the bell? I should think so! We have been the most glorious round through the forests up to a lovely bend in the river where it forms seven little waterfalls. It was exquisite, and Tartar and Boss liked it as much as I did. They thanked me to the best of their ability by putting their noses into my hand and looking up as much as to say, 'We are going to be very good friends with you.'"

Mrs. Staunton said no more, for the servants were in the room, but Launce could not help thinking what a lovely, healthy flush her exercise had brought to their young guest's cheek. Her immense fund of animal spirits was new to him, and he could not but be amused at her unconscious free-and-easy manner.

After luncheon was over and the servants had left the room, Mrs. Staunton said, firmly: "I am sorry to have to interfere with your pleasures in any way, but I must beg of you to take no more long rambles by yourself. It is very unseemly in a young girl."

Nora flushed.

"I should be very much obliged if you will tell me the harm that there can be. I have always been accustomed to take long walks."

"But not by yourself?"

Her lips quivered painfully, but she answered defiantly: "I did not go alone, because my father was always with me; but if he could not go he was not afraid to trust me alone."

"It is not a question of trusting you, at all," said Mrs. Staunton, coldly. "It is simply improper for a young girl to go rambling about without a protector. Until I can procure the

services of a companion for you, I must beg that you will confine your walks to the grounds. I shall be very happy if you will drive with me in the afternoon, when I will show you all the beauties of our neighborhood. Of course I shall make it a *sine qua non* that the governess I engage for you is a good walker."

"A governess!" cried Nora. "It is of no use for you to trouble yourself on that point, for I shall not have one!"

"You forget yourself when you speak in that manner. I am equal neither to superintending your studies nor to acting as your companion."

"One is as unnecessary as the other. The instruction I have received is better than any governess could give me. Your sense of propriety shall not again be shocked by my walking out alone, I promise you, but at the same time, I won't have a governess!" And with obstinately set mouth and flashing eyes, she had left the room.

"Mother, I am sorry to interfere with you," said Launce. "But I think we must give way here. Trescott taught her himself, and very probably she may feel that no one should take his place."

"It would be very sentimental to allow her to grow up ignorant for such a reason."

"I will speak to her about her rudeness to you, and she shall have masters from L— for necessary accomplishments. Meanwhile, if we really find her deficient in other things, of course she must have a governess, but I fancy Trescott will have laid a good foundation."

"Do you for a moment imagine that such a volatile nature could be capable of receiving any foundation?" asked Mrs. Staunton.

"That would be all the more reason for not pressing your point now." And Mrs. Staunton acquiesced, although it was only in accordance with human nature that this little incident had not increased the warmth of her feelings toward Nora Trescott.

Launce then went in search of the rebel, whom he found in the flower-garden; and as she turned round at his approach, he thought he saw tears in her eyes, but there was no trace of emotion in her voice or manner as she said, flippantly: "Have you come to read me a lecture on propriety? I am afraid your mother is quite shocked."

"She is unused to have her opinions openly disregarded; and I hope that another time, if her arrangements for your welfare do not meet with your approbation, that you will tell her so more courteously." He spoke very firmly, but without the slightest trace of anger; and Nora's eyes fell, for she could but be conscious that she had been rude.

"I am sorry I spoke so rudely," she said, penitently; and he continued: "We wish you to be happy with us, and that your life may be as like what it has been as is possible."

She looked up quickly, as though about to say something, but remained silent, and he continued:

"Will you tell us your reasons for objecting to a governess?"

"No,"—abruptly; but he noticed that there was a suspicious tremulousness about her mouth, and, man-like, dreaded a burst of tears. But Nora was not of the crying order of girls, and said decisively, after a moment's pause, "I do not think I need a governess, and prefer to study alone. I am not quite an ignoramus."

"Well, then, so let it be. My mother will engage a singing and music-master for you, and any other lessons you may wish for, you can have. And"—hesitating slightly—"when you want a walk, tell me, and I shall always be happy to escort you."

"Please don't trouble. I should be very sorry to tax your good-nature so. I will take a constitutional every day round the drive or flower-garden,"—scornfully.

Launce looked displeased. He had made his offer in good part, and she really was too pert.

"There is no reason," he said, "for you to make a martyr of yourself. If you only consult the ordinary rules of society and your better nature, you will see that such restrictions are unnecessary. My mother and I will expect you to take exercise in moderation."

He went away, and Nora felt she had been ungracious; but it hurt her proud spirit to think that she should be a burden anywhere, and she began to feel that she was so considered here. Launce did not hear the passionate cry, "Oh, papa, I am growing so wicked now I have not you to love me!"

Launce naturally put down her curtness to childish petulance, and that evidently she looked on all coercion as tyrannical.

CHAPTER III.

CLOUDS AND SUNSHINE.

AFTER this little explanation, matters went on somewhat smoother. For though at times Nora fretted against her guardian's firm will, she saw that however willing he might be to give way to her in trifles, in matters where he was really decided, resistance was useless. He did not interfere with her more than he could help, thinking it better that she and his mother should gradually learn to accommodate themselves to each other.

Nora had kept strictly to her promise, and had never once gone beyond the bounds of the grounds, and had even condescended to accept Mrs. Staunton's invitation to accompany her in the afternoon's drive. But the monotonous motion and dignified conversation of her companion soon became inexpressibly wearisome to her, and generally she tried to excuse herself.

Thus thrown chiefly upon her own resources, without companions, and restricted to what seemed to her a very limited area, at times she was very depressed and home-sick; but the natural buoyancy of her disposition did not allow these fits to last long, and she contrived to exact a good deal of enjoyment from existence.

This enjoyment, it is but right to add, consisted too often in a malicious amusement at Mrs. Staunton's expense; for to the merry-hearted Nora there was something very ridiculous in the elder lady's old-fashioned propriety. She delighted in shocking her by some unexpected announcement or action, although Mr. Staunton's grave displeasure generally made her feel like a naughty school-girl after she had indulged in such a pastime.

Sometimes she longed for her companions, Will and Agnes Trevor, and even had thoughts of petitioning for one or both of them; but on second thoughts she reflected, "It is bad enough to be here myself without being wanted, and I certainly am not going to put myself under further obligations."

But it was not for her young friends alone that she longed. Often, when no one was near, the irrepressible tears would stream through the slim white fingers as she buried her face in her hands, and moaned, "Papa, papa, how can I live without you?"

Mrs. Staunton might think her heartless and forgetful, and even Launce be unable to understand her seeming light-heartedness; but the early sorrow had left a scar on her heart which no years or change of scene would ever efface. It would have been impossible for her always to be miserable, even had she felt it incumbent.

The birds were singing, the sun was shining, and the fresh young blood coursing through her veins, making her heart throb with gladness, and could she refuse the invitation of nature to join in the universal rejoicing?

One afternoon, however, about five weeks after her arrival at Fairholme, she was beset by a worse feeling of loneliness and despair than she had experienced since the dreadful moment when she heard the mold fall on her dead father's coffin.

She had wandered out into the shrubbery with book and paper in hand, and had sat down on the fallen trunk of a tree to finish a caricature, which she was drawing for her own edification and that of Will and Agnes when she should again meet them. We are almost afraid for the reputation of our heroine when we confess that it was intended to represent Mrs. Staunton as teacher of a district school, awing with majestic demeanor her young charges into silence. Underneath was scribbled, "How we repress nature at Fairholme."

The excitement of sketching had flushed her cheeks and given even more brightness than usual to her sunny smile and gleaming eyes.

But at last the sketch was done, and when she grew tired of laughing over it, she opened the book she had been drawing on, and began to read. It was "The Epic of Hades," and had been a gift from her father. It was full of passages which he had marked when they had read it together and her eyes lingered long on these places as she recalled the loving, kind words with which he tried to teach her to draw noble inspirations from such works. The little caricature was quite forgotten, and the hot tears fell from her eyes, blistering the page on which stood those lovely words:

"For I know
How far high failure overleaps the bound
Of low successes."

They had been his favorite, and she remembered when and how they had read them last. Her hand had lain in his, and he had looked into

her young, glowing face with tender love while he said, "Is it not so, my Nora? The aim sanctifies the life, not the success. Do not be contented with low aims, my darling. Ever upward—ever higher! 'Excelsior!' it still rung, even when the tired climber could go no more, and his weary body sunk lifeless to the earth."

"Oh, why can I not be noble as you were? Papa—oh, papa!"

And she buried her face on the moss-grown trunk, and wept passionately.

It seemed all so dark. So absorbing was her grief that she had not heard footsteps approach, and she started with fear as Mr. Staunton sat down beside her, saying, "What is this, Nora? Have you any new trouble?"

He hated a scene, but the sight of her sorrow seemed a reproach, for it made him feel that his dead friend's confidence was not justified. Nora did not look up, so that she did not see the genuine look of distress on his face, and was only annoyed that he should discover her indulging in tears.

"Oh, nothing new. Only a fit of the blues. You see, I haven't got used to the repressing process yet."

"Poor child! I am afraid it is very dull for you here."

"Please, don't pity me. If there is one thing I hate more than another, it is to be pitied."

He ignored her remarks, and continued, "Tell me, is there nothing we can do to make you feel more at home?"

"At home! I could never feel at home here!"

She felt angry with herself for being so ungracious; but why should he come and try to soothe her like a naughty child, when her heart was aching with this great void?

He winced at her words, and said, gravely: "I am sorry to hear you say so. It grieves me inexpressibly that my oldest friend's child should feel so unhappy under my roof."

"I am very sorry that your oldest friend has inflicted such discomfort on you. Were it in my power, I would willingly relieve you of it."

"You are determined to misunderstand me," he said. "What I mean is, that I fear that my mother and I are too dull for you, and that you need young companions."

"Oh, pray don't trouble. I shall soon learn to be the same."

"I do not wish it," he rejoined. "It is natural for you to be gay, and when I see you dull like this it makes me reproach myself bitterly. You must have more exercise—both walking and on horseback. Do you like riding?"

"Thank you, I shouldn't care about it here. I have not been accustomed to go ambling about the country with a groom at my heels."

"Nor do I wish you to do so now. I mean you to go with me."

"Mr. Staunton, I told you before that I didn't want you to sacrifice your comfort for me, and so I say again. It's enough to have to live in your house, without taking any further favors from one who only does things from a sense of duty."

And without waiting to hear more, she fled, leaving her book on the ground.

Launce stood looking after her for a minute, an angry light in his eyes.

"It is not my fault if she will be wretched. And yet I cannot bear it. The girl draws me to her even when she would repel me most. Poor child!" he murmured, as he picked up the book. "This is the occasion of her grief. I wish she would let me be a friend to her."

Musingly he turned over the pages, dwelling, as Nora had done, on the marked passages, and remarking regretfully the traces of her grief in tear-blistered leaves. At last he came to the caricature, and could not forbear a laugh, it was so cleverly done.

"What an odd nature it is! Who could have doubted her grief just now?—yet a few moments before she must have been merry enough over this piece of mischief! It's outrageous! The mother exactly! Eh, but what's this?"

His eye had fallen upon a sanctimonious young urchin—evidently the good boy of the party—diligently conning his book, and looking with pious disapproval at his comrades. There was no mistake about it. It was meant for himself! He laughed outright.

"Very well, Miss Nora! We will have an understanding about this. You must learn to treat your guardian with befitting respect. I wonder what she will say when I show it to her?" Yet he felt a little sore about it, too, for her dislike pained him. "Why do I care so much?" he thought. "Is it because she is Annette's daughter? Nonsense, Launce Staunton!

It is natural enough that John Trescott's daughter should have a strong hold on your heart, without trying to find deeper reasons."

"Oh, how delightful!" And heedless of Mrs. Staunton's presence, Nora jumped up from the letter she was reading, and went waltzing round the room, clapping her hands, and crying, "Oh, how jolly! Won't we have fun!"

"I wish you would learn more self-restraint, Leonora," said Mrs. Staunton, looking up with dignified displeasure.

"Oh, bother!" was the curt response. "Please don't expect restraint just now. Will is coming!"

"I conclude you mean Mr. Trevor; but I was not aware that he had received an invitation to Fairholme."

"Nor has he; but there are other places besides yours. He is coming after Christmas to study with Mr. March. I was rude, Mrs. Staunton,—with contrition—"to speak to you so; but you wouldn't wonder at my being delighted if you knew what good friends Will and I are."

"Leonora, I must ask you to remember that you can be very good friends with Mr. Trevor without forgetting that you are no longer a child. Remember, he is a young fellow of one-and-twenty, and you are nearly seventeen."

"What has that to do with it?" Nora asked, with astonishment.

"That you must be more careful in your behavior," was the answer.

"Then you mean that I am not to see Will when he comes?"

And Nora drew herself up to her full height, which was very little after all, and looked defiant.

"I do not say so. Mr. Trevor will be very welcome here when he chooses to call; but I wish you to moderate your expressions of attachment to him, and to remember that if he is coming here to study, he will not have time to amuse you."

"He can't study much without me. I used to do nearly all his lessons for him."

"That may have been very well when you were children, but, of course, I could not allow such a thing now. Besides, Mr. Trevor would no doubt prefer that his son studied with only such help as his tutor may think expedient."

"Poor Will! he would be very badly off, then. He never could construe a passage or work a problem without help; and if he comes to me for it, I shall give it him."

Having delivered herself of this sentiment, Miss Trescott abruptly withdrew, and a few minutes later Mrs. Staunton saw her running down to the lake followed by Boss and Tartar. There she seemed to have determined to work off her excitement, for during the next two hours she gave herself up to the vigorous exercise of rowing.

Mr. Staunton had gone to L— on business; and as his mother was dining out, Nora had the evening to herself. She remained out of doors till nearly dusk, and then coming into the drawing-room, sat down to the piano to sing. She had a sweet, pathetic little voice, exquisitely musical, and never attempted anything very elaborate, so that her singing was of the stamp that nearly all like, even if they are not musical.

Unknown to her, Launce had returned, and was in the library listening to her. Never had he heard her sing before; for whenever she began, Mrs. Staunton always closed all intervening doors, so that he might not be disturbed. He listened for a moment as she commenced, and then, as the soft, melodious voice fell pleasingly on his ear, closed his book, and leaned back, drinking in the music with infinite enjoyment.

"Who could think she could be such a termagant to hear her now?" he thought; and determined that when she had tired herself out, he would take her back her book, and try once again to make her like him.

It was growing quite dark, and still the singer went on with one dear old ballad after another, all rendered with touching pathos. First it was "The Banks o' Bonnie Doon," and then, last of all, came "Auld Robin Gray." As the finishing notes died sobbingly away, he heard her rise from the piano, and all was again silent.

"I wonder what she is doing now?" he thought. "I hope not out in the garden; it is too chilly."

Somehow this willful, petulant girl was making a great change in his life, and he found himself thinking and acting for another as he had never done since the old days when Nora's mother was still Annette L'Estrange.

He stepped softly into the drawing-room. No; she was not in the garden, but was kneeling at the open window, gazing up into the blue ether, where the moon's faint silvery streak and several stars were beginning to appear. He hesitated whether to disturb her, the fair young face looked so beautiful and thoughtful in the soft moonlight; but there was a heavy dew rising, and he feared she would take a cold.

"Nora," he said gently, "I have come to thank you for your music."

"I—I didn't know you were here!"—after she recovered from her astonishment.

"Didn't you? Well, I am glad I was. I shall ask for some more songs every evening. But you must not stay at that window without a wrap, it is too chilly. Let me put this round you," and he took up a soft, warm shawl of his mother's, and enveloped her in it.

There was something in his touch that thrilled her strangely, and brought the tears to her eyes.

"I believe you really care," she said gratefully.

"Believe?—why, of course I do!" he replied, tenderly.

"Don't you really dislike me, then, and think me rude and disagreeable?" she asked.

"As to the first, I certainly do not; but I think you do your best to make me think the rest."

"I am sorry," she said, penitently. "I have been rude, but I didn't think you cared."

"And what makes you think so now?" he inquired.

"I don't quite know. Because you brought the shawl, I suppose."

"I did care very much, Nora. Ever since you came I have tried to make you know that I cared, but you have been very obstinate, and I had begun to think that you were quite determined not to like me. Will you try to do so now, for your father's sake? I think he would have been very sorry for us not to be friends."

"I sha'n't have to try," she said, simply.

"We will be friends." And she put her little hand timidly into his.

He pressed it for a moment warmly, and a longing seized him to print a kiss on the broad, fair brow which looked so lovely in the moonlight. He was her guardian, nearly old enough to be her father, therefore why should he not? But an indescribable feeling restrained him, and he asked himself sternly what could be the meaning of this yearning. Surely he was not in love with this child, who, until a few moments before, if she had thought of him at all, had only classed him among her persecutors? It was madness!

"No, no! we will not repeat the story of Auld Robin Gray," he said, firmly, to himself.

But this dangerous quiet must be broken; and holding up the book he had brought with him, he asked her, with a laugh, if she had lost anything.

Her face flushed a deep crimson, and she dropped her head as she said, "Yes; oh, give it me, please! You didn't look inside?"

"Yes, I did; and I am going to keep the little picture as a witness against you when you grow rebellious."

"No, no! Please let me have it!" she pleaded.

"What, to show your friends?" he queried.

"No, no; I want to burn it! I never meant you to see it!"

"No, we won't burn it! I mean to have it framed and hung up in my study. So the good boy was meant for me, eh?"

"No—yes—not exactly! I don't think I really ever thought you were like that; but I wouldn't let myself like you. I am sorry. Please let me have it back."

"Well, what will you let me have if I do?" he asked.

"Oh, anything; only let me tear it up!"

"Will you condescend, then, to ride with me every morning?"

"I should like to come if you will have me now," she answered, coloring.

"Ah, then, I did not calculate so badly, after all. I thought you would change your mind, so I have been to L—to-day, to get you a horse."

"Oh, how delightful! You are good!" Nora said, jumping up and clapping her hands.

"Then you don't object now?"

"No, because I think you like to take me. But I don't like taking favors from people who only do it because it's right. Now I may have the paper, mayn't I?"

"Yes, on condition that this is the last transgression of the sort. And, Nora, my child, you must try to understand my mother better."

"I will try," she said, humbly.

"That is right. Now you are my good little daughter."

"Oh, no; please not that! I will be your sister, but not daughter. That can never be again."

"Forgive me, child. It was thoughtless of me to ask such a thing."

And never again, after seeing the agonized look on her face at his words, did he accuse her of lightly forgetting her dead father.

Early the next morning Nora awoke with a very pleasurable recollection of last evening's explanation.

"He is kind," she thought. "What can I do to show him how glad I am? Oh, I know; I will pick him some flowers, as I used to do for papa."

In less time than it would take most young ladies to make up their minds to get up, Nora had risen, dressed and was out in the garden to put her plan into execution. Even while thus laudably engaged, the spirit of mischief was too strong to be suppressed. She chuckled at the idea of Mrs. Staunton's consternation should she catch her invading her guardian's sanctum. She knew that it was a great piece of audacity on her part, but that did not deter her, and she went boldly in. No one was there, so when she had arranged the flowers to her satisfaction, she had a look around.

"How jolly!" she cried; "just like the dear old room at Hartford. And there—yes—there is my dear old Ruskin!"

And mounting on the steps she reached the coveted volume from its place, and without waiting to descend from her perch, was soon engrossed in its contents.

There, some half-hour later, Launce found her, and truly his consternation at such an invasion of his own peculiar domain was not small.

She laughed as he entered.

"There! now you have caught me, and I didn't want you to know who had done it."

"Didn't you?" he asked, the flowers now catching his eye for the first time. "Thanks for the decorations—they are very pretty; but do you suppose I should attribute such presumption as an invasion of my study to any one less daring than yourself?"

"Do you mind my coming?" she said. "I like your books here, and want you to let me come every day. I always used to read in papa's study."

Of course Launce could not refuse; but bachelor habits are not to be thrown off in a day, and he thought if there was one spot in the world where he could have dispensed with Nora's presence, it was in his study.

CHAPTER IV.

HER DEAREST FRIEND.

RELUCTANTLY though the permission may have been given, Launce never wished to retract it. He soon grew to look for the small, graceful, black-robed figure, and if it were not in its accustomed place on the hearth-rug, or on sunny days in the deep window-seat, he found that his attention wandered from the subject of reading or writing on which he might be engaged. A pair of soft hazel eyes in a delicate oval face, surrounded by a halo of golden hair, would look out from the pages of the most abstruse philosophers, and laughingly mock at all his endeavors to banish it from his thoughts.

Christmas had come and gone, and Launce had grown so accustomed to his young companion that he often wondered how he had done without her. But the day after that fixed for Will Trevor's arrival he noticed that she was very distracted at her work. They were rearranging the library, and she was assisting him with the new catalogue.

"Oh, there he is at last!" she cried, jumping up from the table, and hurrying to the window, as the shadow of a tall, stalwart figure fell across the terrace. "I knew he would come."

"Who is this anxiously expected 'he'?" asked Launce, with slight irritation. "I did not know you expected a visitor."

"It is Will. He came down to Mr. March's yesterday, and I knew he would come to see me first thing." And without further parley she was off with a bound through the French window, crying, "Will, Will, come here! I am so glad to see you!"

The visitor turned quickly at the sound of her voice, and Launce saw him stoop down and bestow a warm kiss on her upturned face.

"I am glad you haven't forgotten old friends. It seems such an age since we met, Nora."

"Insolent young puppy!" growled the looker-on. "I'm not going to allow this sort of thing."

And he bowed a very cold acknowledgment of Nora's introduction.

"Developed his physical proportions at the expense of his intellect," was his mental comment on the athletic-looking young giant, against whom the tiny Nora looked like a little fairy.

She had put her little hand with affectionate confidence into his arm, and looked delighted to see her old playmate again.

"You'll let me off this morning, guardy, won't you?" coaxingly, she said.

"Certainly. I dare say Mr. Trevor has plenty of news for you. We shall be glad if you will stay to luncheon, sir," addressing Will. "Miss Trescott will be anxious to hear of her friends."

"That will be delightful!" Nora cried. And Will bowed in acknowledgment.

"You had better take Mr. Trevor to the drawing-room, and introduce him to my mother."

But inwardly he was very sad.

"What did this fellow want to come down here for and spoil the happy life with Nora? She will not trouble herself much about me now," he reflected bitterly, and turned decisively to his work; but somehow he made very little progress.

"It is good to see you again, Nora," said Will, slinging his arm around her when they had walked away. "You haven't altered a bit."

"Ain't I grown?"—saucily pulling herself up to her full height.

"Grown! Yes, smaller, if anything. You are just the dear little sprite that went away. Nora, I have missed you awfully. There hasn't been any fun since you went away. Agnes has come out, and is transmogrified into an angel of propriety—'Prunes and prisms,' as you used to say."

"But it is a good thing that you have learned to behave yourself before coming down into this part of the world. We are very dignified down here. Starch and pasteboard are limpuess compared to it."

And she made a ridiculous little *moue* expression of disgust.

"But they haven't made you the same?"

"They tried their best, and it is only owing to the obduracy of the subject that their laudable efforts have been frustrated. At least, that is Mrs. Staunton. My guardy is awfully good, and only lectures me when I really deserve it. Now tell me what really prompted you to come down here."

"Partly because the governor wants me to cram for that beastly exam., and he has heard that March is such a clever fellow. When I found out how near he was to you I didn't want persuading."

"And you really are going to work this time?" she said, anxiously.

"Oh, yes! I am going to try just to please the old fellow. But it's an awful bore; and I'll tell you what, Nora—if you hadn't been down here nothing on earth would have persuaded me to come."

"Well, I'm very glad you have come, and I hope you'll really work. I do so want you to get your diploma."

"So do I, Nora; but this confounded exam. will do for me again. I'm sure no one could accuse me of want of pluck. I would stand up to be shot at a hundred times if I had lives enough; but it's confoundedly hard lines on a fellow to expect him to work with his brains when he hasn't got any to work with."

"You lazy boy! I believe you have really come so that I shall do all your work, as I used to."

"Do you really think so, Nora?"—looking down on the diminutive figure with an odd yearning look which made him appear rather more earnest than usual. "I thought you knew that I should come to you even if you wouldn't do a thing for me. I was always fond of you, Nora; but I didn't know how fond until you went away."

"That's just it!"—teasingly. "I always said you would become sensible of my worth when I had departed and you had forgotten my vices."

"I never thought you had any vices, Nora."

"Oh, Will! not when we fought for the rosiest apple, and when I hid away your hat so that you should have to stay at home with me all day?"

"That was when we were children, Nora. I'm not joking now, and I don't believe you're half as fond of me as I am of you."

"What an exacting boy! Wasn't I delighted to see you, and am I not standing talking to you now, when I ought to go and fetch Mrs."

Staunton? I like you better than any one else in the world, Will; you are my dear old brother!"

"Really, Nora?"

"Yes, of course; and shall like you all the better if you work hard and pass your examination. I don't like ignorant people. Now I'm going to fetch Mrs. Staunton. Mind, you must be awfully polite, or she won't let you come again!"

The quiet, peaceful days were at an end, and Launce was beginning to relapse into his former cold manner. It was very seldom that Nora spent a whole morning in the study with him now, and if they rode or walked, Will was always sure to join the party. Even had it not been that Launce felt himself supplanted, he would have been very grieved about this warm intimacy.

Will did not improve upon acquaintanceship. Even to an unprejudiced observer it was clear that there was very little stamina behind the handsome, off-hand exterior; and Launce knew that, despite Nora's seeming frivolousness, she was endowed with intellectual abilities of no common order. That Will was in love with her Launce never doubted, but he believed that she was perfectly heart-whole; and therefore, much as he feared the issue, he would put no peremptory stop to the familiar intercourse, fearing that any apparent persecution would only fan her friendship into affection.

As the summer came on, festivities multiplied. Nora was soon the leading spirit of every party, no assembly being considered complete without her. It was but natural that such adulation should be acceptable to her, and even Launce could not deny that she played her part with exquisite grace and spirit. But the role recalled too vividly her dead mother to be pleasing to him, and on the very first opportunity he determined to speak to her.

"Well, Nora," he began, one wet day when they had settled down for a few quiet hours in the study, "do you think you will be able to put up with only my society for a day?"

"Why not? We have had lots of pleasant days together."

"Ay, but that was before all this gayety. Now you have tasted the sweets of dissipation, do you think you can forego them for a day?"

"I should be very sorry if I could not! Why do you speak so, guardy? Don't you like me to enjoy myself?"

"Yes, so long as I don't think it is doing you any harm. My child, don't misunderstand what I say, but I dread your becoming spoilt by flattery. I know, Nora—ay, no one better—how lovely and attractive you are. Don't let those gifts, which are given you to be a source of blessing, become a source of misery."

"What do you mean, guardy?"

"I mean, never be contented with admiration for its own sake. It will come to you—you cannot help that; but when you feel that there may be pain to others when you yourself are safe, be careful, my child, to check it. Never be tempted to play with a man's honest love; and, Nora, be careful how you play with such tools at all. Do you think I am an old croaker, dear? Remember, I have to guard what others have only to admire. I don't want my little flower spoilt."

She put her hand softly into his, and said gently:

"Thanks, guardy; I will try to remember. I know papa would speak as you do now."

"And you will do now as he would have wished?"

The tears filled her eyes as she promised, and Launce felt that so far no harm had been done.

When, a few weeks later, Agnes Trevor came as a guest to their home, Mr. Staunton received abundant proof that his ward was as child-like, and it must be confessed as childish, as ever. She was highly amused at the dignified airs and graces of her quondam playmate, who had, as Will had said, developed into the very impersonation of "prunes and prisms," and the spirit of mischief thus aroused found vent in manifold escapades, in which Will was always a ready abettor.

CHAPTER V.

A PICNIC AND AN ACCIDENT.

As a finishing festivity at the close of Agnes Trevor's visit, a picnic had been arranged to the sea-shore, and Nora had looked forward to it with keen anticipation. The day dawned bright and fair even as she could wish, and unable to rest in bed, she was dressed and out of doors

before any of the rest of the household was astir.

"Isn't it a glorious day, guardy?" she exclaimed, as Launce joined her there. "It does make me feel so happy; doesn't it you?"

"At any rate to see you does," he answered, looking down with tender longing, although his eyes only rested on the golden-crowned head, as her white fingers busied themselves with fastening a flower into his button-hole.

"Do you know," she continued, "that to-day is an anniversary?"

It was just twelve months since her arrival at Fairholme.

"I have not forgotten," he said. "You have brought too much change into the old house for me to forget it."

"I am afraid that I was a dreadful plague!" she said, thoughtfully.

"Well, we won't contradict you; you tried your best to be so, but didn't quite succeed."

"Wouldn't you really be glad if I went away and left you in peace?"

"Little fisher, I thought you knew that I don't belong to the gang who try to turn your small head with nonsense!"

"I know, though," she rejoined with a confident smile. "But I want to go, really,"—looking very serious.

"Nora, what do you mean?" he asked, with a sharp pang of disappointment. "I thought you had grown reconciled to Fairholme."

"I love it," she said; "but I want you to let me go and stay at the Trevors' for a time. They have asked me so often, and I should enjoy it so much. Do let me go, guardy!" she added, coaxingly.

"Of course you can go if you wish it, Nora."

"Thanks, a hundred times! I was afraid you wouldn't let me go, because I know you don't like them. Oh, there's Will! I must go and tell him!" And she danced off, leaving Launce with a very sore feeling in his heart.

"What a confounded idiot I am to care about it! Of course it must be dull for such a bright young thing here."

Yet this philosophy did not hinder his feeling a fresh pang of disappointment as Will Trevor claimed Nora for his party, as a matter of course, and thus frustrated a delightful little scheme that he had planned of driving her with him in the phaeton. He made no remark, but countermanded the order for the phaeton, and took his place in the landau with his mother and another dignified old lady, whom he would not have much occasion to talk to.

The carriage containing Will and Nora, together with several kindred spirits, was just before them, and Launce felt savage as the peals of merry laughter rung through the bright autumnal morning. Will was by her side and was behaving as though she were his exclusive property.

"I wouldn't care if the fellow were only worthy of her," was the constantly recurring thought. And yet, perhaps, there were few men in the world whom Launce would have deemed worthy of the small piece of humanity committed to his charge; certainly none among the picnic party. Yet the young lady herself seemed very well able to put up with a great deal of their society, and Launce had inwardly to chew the cud of disgust, unable to put any check upon her. As the afternoon was advancing, he met her and Will wandering together among the rocky caves.

"Remember the tide will be turning soon," he said, warningly as they passed by.

"All right," Will rejoined, and drew Nora away with him. I want to take you to the 'Witch's Cave,'" he said. "It's so jolly and quiet out there."

"Shall we have time?" she asked.

"Oh, yes; if you be quick. Come along."

And they went on, winding their way in and out of the jagged pieces of rock which made the shore so wonderfully beautiful. The spot they were bound for was at some distance, and although connected with the shore when the tide was out, was entirely surrounded by water when it was in.

The afternoon was lovely, and they loitered on, admiring the beautiful coloring of the rocks, with the yellow sand and the far-off streak of the ocean.

"It is lovely!" cried Nora, as they reached their destination, and she had climbed to the top of the rock, which formed the cave and looked out from one side on to the broad, restless ocean, on the other to the varied coast-line, dotted here and there with a few scattered villages, embosomed in trees in all the splendor of their brilliant autumnal foliage.

"I knew you would like it," said Will, looking with gratification at her bright, expressive face, full of the most intense enjoyment.

"It is glorious!" with a deep sigh of satisfaction. "I could stay and watch this forever."

"We will stay for a time," he said. "See, here is a lovely little seat for you, and I can lie down here at your feet while you enjoy the view."

They remained perfectly quiet for some time, Nora drinking in the beauty and calmness of the scene; but Will grew tired of the silence, and began to talk again.

"I say, Nora, this is just the place I like to have you in. There's no chance of your being bored with a lot of other fellows here."

"Not a bit; it's quite like a desert island! I wish we were children still, then wouldn't we have a splendid game of jack-stones?"

"I don't know about that," he said moodily; "but I wish really we were on a desert island!"

"Do you? I don't. It would grow awfully dull after a time with no one to speak to."

"You would have me."

"But I can have you here, too, and I like a little variety."

"That's just it, Nora! You don't like me nearly as well as I do you! I like it all the better when we are to ours lives, without a lot of confounded fellows hanging about you!"

"Jealous boy! I am sure I see more of you than any one else!"

It never occurred to her that there was anything particular in Will's love for her; she was so accustomed to it and his exacting claims on her attention, that she would have been rather surprised had he been different. Her loyalty to one who really had ever shown her such steady, unswerving affection would not allow her to yield to any feelings of being bored.

"I know he isn't clever," she would think; "but he is such a kind, good-hearted fellow, and no one likes him as well as I do."

But to-day there was something in his tone that made her for the first time in her life feel that she would rather not be quite alone with him, and getting up, she proposed going home.

"They will all be starting," she said, "and will not like to be kept waiting. We shall have to walk quickly."

They rose together, and Will helped her down from her perch, but in a moment her quick eye saw that a great change had taken place meanwhile.

"Look, Will!" she cried; "we are caught in the tide!"

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed, "Nora, what have I done? There is no way of escape, unless we swim; and I daren't let you do that, for the coast is so rocky, and the sea is rough."

"We shall have to stay here," she said resignedly. "Perhaps they will send a boat for us."

"I am afraid no one knows where we are, Nora. The best thing will be for me to swim to shore, and fetch a boat to take you in."

"Oh, no; don't leave me alone, Will! Someone is sure to come! I'm not frightened!"

"But you will catch cold. It is getting chilly already."

"I'm all right;" but her teeth were beginning to chatter, and she looked disconsolately over the advancing waters.

Will took off his own coat and wrapped it round her, although she resisted and said that she was quite warm.

"You must take it," he said. "I am wretched enough at having brought you into such a strait. Do you think anything would be so awful to me as to think that you were ill through my fault?"

"Oh, I sha'n't be ill?" she said. "And it is no more your fault than mine." But she took the coat, and allowed him to place her comfortably in the seat where she had sat before, unconscious of the advancing tide.

"Oh, dear!" she said, after a pause. "I wonder if the sea will reach us?"

"Not here," he said. "You aren't frightened, Nora? I will take care of you, dear."

"Oh, no; not frightened, but it is dull. You don't like the desert island now, Will?"

"If I weren't afraid for you, I should," he answered.

"I wonder if we shall have to stop all night?" she began again. "Oh, surely some one will come, Will? They would never go home without us?"

"I should think not. I wish that you would let me try and reach the shore. I cannot bear that you must stop here."

"No; we will stay together," she said, decisively. "It is not safe for any one to do such a thing. It is such a distance, and the rocks are

so treacherous. We must make up our minds to staying here. I only hope we sha'n't fall asleep and tumble into the water."

"Never fear," he said. "Sleep as much as you like. I shall hold you safe enough."

"It's an awfully ridiculous position; every one on shore will be distracted, and will be imagining the most awful catastrophes, while we are seated comfortably here, only waiting for the sea to kindly retire in order to walk home again. I am afraid they'll be disappointed, Will," and she laughed at the idea in spite of her weariness.

Their absence had not been noted by the rest of the party until all were assembling to return. Then, in answer to his inquiries, Launce heard that nothing had been seen of them since he himself met them on the beach.

"I believe they were going to the 'Witch's Cave,'" said Agnes. "Will said something about doing so."

"And has no one seen them return?" said Mr. Staunton, with forced calmness.

There was a dead silence, but instinctively the eyes of each bystander turned to the advancing waters, that had now covered the yellow sands and were breaking with considerable violence on the cliffs. The bright beauty of the day had turned to a windy autumnal night, and Launce's face was very set and white as, after giving orders for search to be made on land, he turned in the direction of the nearest fisherman's cottage in order to procure a boat to go himself in quest of the missing pair. The horrible fear, which he tried in vain to repress, that they might have started on the homeward way before noticing that the tide had turned, made the few steps seem miles to him. The sullen roar of the foamy, tossing waves sounded like a dirge, and it seemed to his overwrought fancy that far out in the deepening gloom he could see a fair agonized face appealing to him for aid, and hear Nora's voice rise in a shriek of despair as she tried in vain to battle with the cruel waters.

"I come, my darling, I come!" he muttered, passing his hand over his eyes to shut out the awful picture. "Only wait and trust, my Nora!"

"To the 'Witch's Cave,'" he said, himself seizing the oars and plying them vigorously. "I fear that a lady and gentleman have been caught by the tide there, and will pay you double or treble if you reach it quickly."

"All right, sir. We'll do it in a short spell, but it's a roughish night, and the coast is deceitful. We'll have our work to steer clear o' the rocks. But my lad here 'ull take the ropes, and we'll bring her along somehow. The 'Witch's Cave' ain't a nice sleeping-place for a young lady."

Launce scarcely seemed to hear his companion's words—he was too eagerly trying to hurry on the preparations for a start; and even when they were in motion, the way through the surging waters seemed interminable; and he ground his teeth with suppressed impatience at the devious course which the jagged rocks obliged them to take, while he thought of Nora, exposed to the chill night air in her light summer dress.

"Can you see anything?" he asked of the boy at the helm. "I can make out nothing in this infernal darkness."

"It's a good stretch off yet," was the response.

And he bent again to the oar until the boy sung out, "There it be, just afore us! But the sea's pretty well covered it."

"Can you see any one?" he asked, trying himself to distinguish some moving object on the ragged mass of rocks which stood up, bare and gaunt like a horrible phantom, before them, the angry waves dashing against its sides.

"They couldn't live o' this side. T'other side is a nice little nest, where they might sit out o' reach o' the water. We'll have to pull round there."

"Halloa, then!—they'll answer, if they are there." And he himself sent a deep ringing shout over the noisy waters. "Hark!—yes, surely that was an answer! That was more than the howl of the wind or the shriek of the sea-birds. Pull—pull, my man!" he cried. "They are there!"

And a deep sigh of thankfulness broke from him as, a moment later, the boat rounded a sharp corner, and he saw the outline of two figures, Nora's white dress showing up plainly against the dark rock.

Even in that moment of relief, Launce felt a sharp thrill of pain to see Will Trevor's arm supporting her on her perilous perch, and to imagine his voice cheering and comforting her

in those dreary hours of waiting. What might such moments not effect on an impressionable nature like Nora's? But now the chief thought was to get her into the boat, which it was impossible to bring close, on account of the jagged edges of the rock.

"Wait a moment!" he cried, as Nora, with a cry of delight, prepared to scramble down, but drew back, with a scared look, at the watery barrier between them. In a moment he had laid aside his oar, and stood up ready to receive her in his arms from Will, who looked pale and more solemn than he had ever seen him before.

"Thank Heaven, you have come!" he said, brokenly. "I have tried to take care of her; but if she is ill—"

He stopped, while Launce replied, sternly: "You may have taken care since the accident, but its occurrence proves you to be utterly untrustworthy!"

"For shame, guardy!" cried Nora, her eyes flashing indignantly, and putting her hand confidently in Will's, who had taken his place by her in the boat. "Will was no more in fault than I, and he has been so good; he even made me put on his coat, so that I should not take cold, and wouldn't have a bit himself. I don't mind a bit, Will; and now we are off, I think it was good fun!"

Well, it was rather hard. His had been all the agony of suspense and waiting, and now she even resented his indignation on her behalf, while the real culprit was treated with gratitude!

CHAPTER VI.

BY MISTAKE.

IN spite of Nora's protestations that no harm had come to her, she awoke the next morning with a violent cold and sore throat, and Will heard, with keen self-reproach, that she was unable to leave her room. He turned away from the door with downcast face, and walked moodily home, feeling unfit for his work, or to do anything but saunter about and think of Nora, much to the disgust and annoyance of his tutor, who, poor man! was beginning to despair of putting him through the ordeal of examination. Every day he went up to the Hall to inquire after Miss Trescott's health, and always received the same answer—that she was still too unwell to receive visitors.

Mr. Stanuton, too, had been moody and unsettled since the day of the picnic. He could not but feel that the old happy relations with his ward had been rudely disturbed, and he knew that Nora resented his stern reproof to Will, and found it impossible to renew the old tone which had made their intercourse so pleasant.

"Why should I love her?" he reflected. "I cannot expect a young creature like that to care for the society of her father's old chum. Of course she looks on me as an old fogey, and I— Well, I'm not going to make a fool of myself after all these years."

Nora, deserted by one, and shut up from the other, really felt ill and low-spirited; so that, one afternoon about a fortnight after the accident, she quite jumped with delight as the shadow of Will Trevor's figure fell across the terrace; and, running to the door, she welcomed him with a warmth of expression which chased the gloominess from his own face.

"Why, Nora," he cried, eagerly accepting her invitation to enter. "I thought I was never going to see you again, and have been making myself awfully wretched at the thought of having made you ill!"

"You silly boy! You could not help it any more than I."

"But you are better now?" he said anxiously.

"You have grown thinner, Nora."

"Oh, nonsense! I'm all right, and shall soon be well again. Now tell me about yourself. Have you been working hard?"

"I couldn't, Nora. I have been thinking about you, and couldn't fix my mind on anything else."

"Now, that's nonsense, Will! You are a lazy fellow, and make me very angry. I shall be so ashamed if you fail again!"

"Look here, Nora," he said, humbly. "I know I'm not working properly; but it's all your fault. I—I love you, Nora, with all my heart; and if you would only promise to care for me a little bit, I will drudge away like a cart-horse to please you! Nora, dear, you will— you do love me, don't you?"

"Oh, I don't know, Will!" she cried, in alarm. "I have never thought of this!"

"Try to do so, now dear. I know I'm a blockhead as compared with you, darling, but if

any one can do anything for me, it's you, Nora. I could do all for your sake. Dearest, I think you do love me; only I have frightened you. Remember what we have always been, Nora!"

"I do, Will; but our love has never been like what you talk of now."

"Mine has, Nora; and, by Heaven, I never thought you would have played with me!"

"Oh, Will, please don't say that!"

"But I do. I have never tried to hide it from you ever since the time when I used to carry you on my shoulders, and you promised to be my little wife."

"That was when we were children, Will. It is all so different now."

"Yes, different," he said bitterly. "Because you have come among new friends who have taught you to forget the old. I'm no duller now than I was then; but you never found me so until Launce Staunton began to enlighten you. Why, Nora," and his voice trembled with emotion, "I should like to know who in the world could love you as I do? I never seem to remember the time when you weren't all the world to me; and he—"

"Hush, hush, Will! You break my heart when you talk so! Do let us go on as we have always done; we have been so happy!"

"No, that can't be; I must either have you altogether, or not at all, and then I don't care what becomes of me. I shall go to the bad as quickly as I can!"

"That's mean, Will!" she cried, indignantly. "You have no right to threaten me, and it doesn't make me feel any more inclined to love you. If you can't keep straight without me, you would not be able to do so with me!"

"What will you have me to do, then?" he said, kneeling down, and looking into her eyes, his own brimful of eloquent yet mute passion. There was nothing melodramatic in the action, for with all his faults Will was natural enough, but he wanted to bring his face on a level with hers, and look more intently into the soft, brown eyes. "Nora, don't be hard on me! I thought you really loved me!"

Her eyes filled with tears, and the pity which is so near akin to love lessened the strength of her resolution, for she could not bear to inflict pain on her old playfellow. What was it that made her so hard-hearted? Was it really that she feared Launce Staunton? Had he not himself warned her against slighting an honest man's love?—and yet she knew that he would look with considerable coolness on Will's suit.

"But that ought not to make me desert him!" she thought. "He is my oldest friend. How can I let him be so unhappy?"

Will saw in the downcast eyes and serious face that she was wavering, and gathering his courage, made a final appeal, but still she withdrew herself from his touch, and said, piteously, "Oh, Will, I can't! Please ask me anything but that!"

"But this is all you can give, Nora! Oh, my darling, you will not send me away to lead a lonely, miserable life, as it must be without you! I will take such care of you, and be so proud if you will only be my wife! You shall never repent your generosity in making me the happiest fellow in the world, though I know it's like my impertinence even to think of you!"

"Oh, no, Will, it isn't that! I feel very grateful to you for your love—it is an honor; but we are so young!"

"Now, that's all nonsense, Nora; it isn't worthy of you! If we are old enough to fall in love, we are old enough to say so, and you and I have had plenty of opportunity to know one another. If you have made up your mind to reject me, do it frankly; don't keep me in suspense!"

He had turned away impatiently, and was looking moodily into the fire.

Nora was silent, but he saw that her mouth quivered, and the tears were gathering under the downcast lashes.

"Don't do that, Nora; I can't bear it!" he cried, repentantly, flinging his arm around her, and trying to wipe away the tears. "I am a brute to worry you, and I'll go!"—with an audible sob in his own voice, and a dull, hopeless look in his eyes.

"No, don't go, Will—at least, not till you say you forgive me, and that you don't mind!"

"What? not mind?" And he laughed bitterly. "I am not quite so meek as that fellow (Toots, wasn't it?) that you used to laugh about. It is of some consequence; but you can't help it, and I shall have to bear it!"

She was sobbing violently now.

"Oh, Will, you break my heart! I cannot bear it!"

"Why should you, Nora?"—his voice grow-

ing gentle again, and bending over her fondly. "I believe you do love me, after all, only I have startled you so, and it will be anguish for me to go away never to see you again."

"But you will? You wouldn't go away and leave me, Will?"

"How can I help it? I can't stay wearing my heart out with longing if it's of no use. I shall go away from home; and Heaven knows if I shall ever return!"

"But just think of your father and mother!"

"What's the use of a fellow's father and mother when the woman he loves best in the world throws him over?"

"I haven't done that, Will."

"And you won't darling! I see it in your dear eyes! Nora, sweetest pet, you will be my wife, won't you?"

"I will try, Will. Please don't say any more. It seems so strange!"

In the first transport of his joy, he wrapped her in his strong young arms, and her heart beat painfully with a wild feeling of unrest. She thought with apprehension of Launce Staunton's face when he should hear of what she had done.

Perhaps Will defined to a certain extent what was passing in her mind, for he said: "You will not let any one come between us? I know Launce Staunton will try to make you give me up."

"I have promised to be your wife, Will," she said, gravely, "and you must trust me. Do you think I should let any one speak against you?"

"I can trust you, darling; and, thank goodness, I shall have a right now to protect you from his confounded hectoring!"

"I should advise you not to interfere with him," she said, laughing. "I don't think he will quite realize the importance of our position as an engaged couple."

Will's interview with Mr. Staunton was certainly a trying one for a young lover. His listener sat with immovable and unsympathetic face while he floundered through his story.

"I am very sorry to hear this," he remarked, at its close.

"Why?" said Will, hotly. "If Miss Trescott is willing to accept me, I don't see what reason you can have against it."

"Simply this: she is too young to know her own mind, and I do not think you are a man fitted to make her happy."

"I have no doubt you think that you would succeed better!" said Will, angrily; "but as Miss Trescott has judged differently, I prefer undertaking the responsibility."

Launce winced, for the arrow shot home. Yes; she had judged for herself, and although, as her guardian, he felt that he must conscientiously try to prevent her taking any step which might injure her future happiness, his own love-dream was over, and he was fully awake now, laughing bitterly at his own folly in having thought the dream so sweet. It was a few minutes before he spoke again, and then there was a softened ring in his voice.

"I think both of you are too young to thoroughly realize the importance of the step you are taking; and Nora, at any rate, has seen too little of the world to be bound by any formal engagement."

"I am not likely to change," said Will. "I have loved Nora all my life, and she has promised to love me."

"Still, I must insist on you both waiting a year. It will be better for both."

"So be it, then," said Will. "I am not afraid of Nora; but listen! Mr. Staunton, if you turn her from me, I will make you answer for it!"

Mr. Staunton smiled, but it was a very dreary, cold smile.

"I shall do nothing to come between you. Everything can go on as it has done; and if, when she is eighteen, her mind is still the same, you will have my consent. Until then we will not speak of it. But there is one thing I would say to you," he continued, passing his hand over his forehead, and motioning his visitor to resume the seat he had just left. "I feel that the happiness of my dead friend's daughter is a sacred trust, and one that I can only resign to a man who would regard it as solemnly as I do myself."

"Mr. Staunton," cried Will, eagerly, "on my word of honor, I feel this as you do. You shall have no cause to doubt the steadfastness of my love."

"Not of your love," said Mr. Staunton, quietly; "but of your purpose. Nora may love you now; but, believe me, unless you also prove yourself worthy of her respect, the future will be a sad

one to her. There is a depth in her nature which ordinary acquaintances may not perceive, and it is of this inner nature in her that you must make yourself worthy. She will not be contented with love, however warm, which only finds expression in words and caresses."

"Forgive me, Mr. Staunton, if I spoke warmly just now. Nora is far above me, I know, without your telling me; but she loves me, and I think I can do anything for her sake. You shall see that I am in earnest."

"I hope so. And now good-by. I will speak to Nora, and let her know what I have told you."

But after Will was gone he sat like one stupefied, and could not muster the courage to send for his ward. How could he speak to her on this subject while his own love was fighting for utterance?

"If he were but worthy of her, I would do it gladly. And yet why should I judge him? He loves her dearly, and any young girl would do the same."

Yet he could not feel satisfied. At the best, he could but see Nora descend from the bright, spiritual girl into a prosaic, commonplace housewife, all the cravings for a higher, nobler life stifled by the baseness of her surroundings.

"Oh, Nora, if you would but have loved me, I believe I could have made you happy!"

It was a bitter cry from an anguished heart, for now Mr. Staunton stood face to face with the truth. He loved Nora Trescott with all the wealth of love that had gathered in his heart through these long years of loneliness since her mother had first checked the rising spring of a young man's first affection. And this second blow was worse, far worse, than the first; for he knew that with his love for Nora was bound up all that was finest, noblest, and tenderest in his heart.

As he looked into the future, and saw himself alone, unloved, unloving, it seemed that years were added to his life and the beauty all gone from it. But he had a task before him, and the sooner it was accomplished the better; so taking his hat, he went into the garden, thinking it probable he should find Nora there.

He was right; and his heart gave a painful throb as he saw her seated on the very same spot where he had found her on that memorable afternoon when his attempt to win her confidence had met with such an abrupt reception. She, too, saw him coming, but did not go to meet him, for she knew Will had seen him, and she felt awkward and confused.

"I will not hear anything against Will," she said to herself, with an odd sort of defiant feeling. "I do love him, and if I can make him happy I ought to do so."

So she remained quite quiet until he came up to her, and instead of beginning at once on the subject in hand, reproved her for sitting on the damp seat.

"You will make yourself ill again," he said, warningly. "I wish you would learn to be more careful."

"Poor old guardy!" she said, getting up in obedience to his wishes. "I should think you would be quite glad when you haven't got me to look after any more."

"Do you think so?" he said, sadly. "I am sorry my guardianship has been so ungraciously performed."

"Now, I didn't mean that," she said.

"And yet you seem very anxious to withdraw yourself from it," he said. "Nora, dear, I had hoped to keep you with us for some years."

She blushed and said softly. "Has Will told you, then?"

"Yes, he has told me, and I have told him what I must tell you now—that you are too young to enter upon a formal engagement, and must wait for a year at least."

"A year? Well, that isn't very long. I don't quite see the use, because it isn't likely we should either of us change in a year when we have loved each other all our lifetime."

"Nora," he said, gravely, "I am glad that you look at the matter so sensibly, and want you to consider well in this year the importance of the step you are taking. Remember that you will be taking a life-long companion, and weigh well in your own mind if Mr. Trevor be the man whom you can accept as such."

"Of course I can. Why, guardy, I love Will better—yes, better than any one in the world,"—her loyalty to the absent making her quick to perceive any detraction of him. "I think him a dear, good fellow, and I know he loves me."

"I am sure he does, Nora; and yet, remember, love is not the only thing necessary to in-

sure a happy marriage. There must be a sympathy of tastes and intellectual equality."

"Will and I have always been together," she answered. "I know you never liked him, guardy; but I didn't think you would be so unkind to speak against him now when I love him so dearly!"

And she looked very angry, her eyes filling with tears.

"I do not speak against Mr. Trevor, Nora, for himself, only as a husband for you."

"If I like him as a husband," she said, warmly, "I think that is enough. He is quite good enough for me."

"Well, Nora, you must forgive me if I seem over-anxious for your welfare. I felt it to be my duty to warn you; and remember, you are very young."

"I know," she said, "you mean to be kind. It's a great worry for you to have to think about me at all."

"To think about you? Why, child, if you could but know—"

The words were trembling on his lips, but he kept them back.

"Well," said Nora, "we may consider ourselves engaged, although other people are not to know it."

"That must be as you will. No engagement will be recognized until you are eighteen."

"That's six—nine—eleven months. Oh, I can trust Will till then, and you, guardy, shall see that we are in earnest."

Mr. Staunton turned into his study, whence about an hour after he saw the young people strolling hand-in-hand in the flower-garden.

"She seems really happy," he thought.

"Ah, I suppose this is a time to feel really the joyousness of love! What should an old fellow like me have to do with it?"

"Ah, years may come, and years may bring

The truth that is not bliss;
But will they bring another thing
That can compare with this?"

CHAPTER VII.

IN SPITE OF HIMSELF.

WHATEVER the years were to bring in the future, for the present, Nora was happy; need we add, Will no less so. He had taken Mr. Staunton's words to heart, and was working with such a will, that it seemed he was going to take life in earnest after all. Nora was delighted, and felt not a little proud, as well as happy, to think that he was turning out so much better than the Fairholme people had ever given him credit for. Even Mrs. Staunton could not accuse her of looking at this in a frivolous light, and felt touched by the girl's gentle admonitory manner to her boy-lover.

"Does she feel, I wonder, that the stamina must all be on her side?" mused the keen-eyed old lady, as she overheard Nora's decisive refusal of a request from Will to accompany him for a ride.

It was a beautiful clear morning, and Mrs. Staunton knew enough of Nora to feel that the proposal was a tempting one for her, and that it could only be her determination to keep Will to his work that could make her so inflexible. Christmas was drawing very near, and with it the time for Nora's visit to the Trevors, and all Will's entreaties for occasional relaxations of work were answered by a recommendation to wait for the holidays.

"We shall have plenty of time to enjoy ourselves then," she would say; "and I do so want you to work now, Will, so that I may be proud of you."

"Well, so I do, little monitor. I'm wearing myself to a shadow to satisfy your ambition."

"A very substantial shadow," she said, laughing, and pointing to the reflection of his well-developed figure in the long pier-glass.

"All the more to protect you then," he retorted, holding the tiny form easily in the grasp of one huge arm. "Don't you think, Nora, you are a little tyrant to me? I scarcely seem to see anything of you, and when I do come you only blow me up."

"It's all for your good, sir. You are such a lazy fellow, I know you want keeping up to the mark."

"Well, I'll do the work now; but mind, I shall look for my reward after."

"That's right. If you keep your promise, you may trust me to keep mine. But I don't think I could forgive you if you failed this time. Remember it is the last examination, and if you fail now, all the rest will be of no use."

"I declare sometimes I feel inclined to throw it all over," he said, with a sigh of weariness. "It's an awful bore, and I might just as well settle down and help the governor."

"Will, I won't hear you say such things. You've no right to think of giving up your work just because you tire of the drudgery. You always wanted a college education; what is the use of your trying to have it, if you get tired of it directly?"

No more was said then, but in spite of her pleasure in Will's love and her own affection for him, Nora felt a little wearied and disappointed at the difficulty she had of getting him to stick to anything. Sometimes she longed to speak to Mr. Staunton about it, but she saw so little of him now, and such a barrier seemed to have grown up between them, that she could not gather courage to do so. She felt that he rather avoided her, and could only think that the change in his manner was occasioned by his disappointment in her choice. This put her on her mettle, and made her determine to hide any dissatisfaction which she felt. For conscious as she could but be of Will's shortcomings, her loyalty made her quick to resent any allusion, tacit or otherwise, to them by others, and at this time his love and wish to please her made him show to his best. She thought it unkind of her guardian to adopt such a cold, distant manner, and she kept away from the study, the scene of all their old confidences and happiness.

Her sense of resentment reached a crisis when one morning, a few days before her departure for the long-promised visit to the Trevors, he looked up from his breakfast and said, abruptly:

"Mother, Greenwood is starting off for a journey through Egypt and the North of Africa. He wants me to join him."

Mrs. Staunton put down her cup, and Nora noticed that the firm white hand was trembling, but she only said, quietly:

"And you? Do you feel disposed to do so?"

"Yes, I am tempted. I have been rusticated so long at home that I think the change would be welcome. I want to get away for a time, and have always fancied I should like to go to Egypt."

There was a wearied, lifeless tone in his voice that struck Nora as unusual; and for herself, she could only look forward with vague terror to Fairholme without its master, and listened with beating heart for the answer to Mrs. Staunton's next question.

"When shall you start? I suppose your return would be uncertain?"

"We should start the second week in the new year, and I don't suppose we should be away more than a year or so."

How cruel and heartless he was, to go away like that and leave them all alone! Nora trembled with indignation, and the sensitive lips quivered painfully as she bravely struggled with her toast and coffee.

"Why—oh! why does he do it?" she cried, as to her intense relief, Mr. Staunton quitted the room; and she was left alone with his mother, who looked immovable and calm as ever, except for the nervously twitching hands which she in vain strove to steady. With an unaccountable impulse, Nora threw herself into her arms and exclaimed:

"Don't let him go away! He has no right to go and leave you alone! It is cruel and wrong of him!"

"My dear, Launce has always some good reason for his actions. If it is for his good, I am willing that he should go."

"But how can it be for his good?"

"I cannot tell you, my child; but you must not fret about it. I am sure Launce would be very sorry to give you pain."

"I believe he only wants to go away until I have gone for good!" said Nora, hotly.

Ah! little did Nora think how much truth there was in her words.

"Is this really your intention, Launce?" said Mrs. Staunton to her son, some hours later.

"Yes, mother," he answered. "I am sorry to leave you so long; but I feel the old restlessness, and want to rouse myself up a bit. Fairholme's a very nice place; but one gets tired of a house that is no—" He was going to say "home," but checked himself. "You won't be alone. Nora will be back soon after I have gone. Take care of her, mother, and—try to understand her."

"Nora has much improved lately. She is quieter and more self-contained. But, Launce, I wanted to speak about her. I fear she is not quite happy."

"Not happy? Why, what would she have? Do you mean that young Trevor is not—"

"Mr. Trevor is attentive enough, and loves her as well as it is in his nature to love anything. But, Launce, you were right; Nora has deep feelings, and I am sure she feels that you have changed toward her."

He laughed bitterly.

"Nora must not be too exacting. Mr. Trevor might well object to my monopolizing her as of old. But believe me, mother mine, Nora avoids me, not I her. I am sure you are wrong."

"You would not say so if you had seen her this morning. She was quite unstrung by your abrupt announcement."

"Did she grieve?" And the mother's quick ear caught the ring of satisfaction in his voice. "Poor little tender-hearted girl! I would I could stay, but I may not, dare not. Take care of her, mother. Remember she has no one but us. Take care of her for my sake—for my promise to her dead father."

And Mrs. Staunton said no more, for she knew that Launce was not setting out on his travels again without a reason.

After this interview with his mother, Launce had a hard struggle to resist his longing for a few words with Nora. It would have been sweet to have heard her dear voice pleading for him to stay, even though he knew that it was but the child-like love to her dead father's friend that made her cling to him; but he resisted it, for he feared to lose the control of his own feelings should she show only for one moment the old tender, loving manner, and to frighten her by an avowal of his real reason for leaving her.

And so it happened that nothing was said until she placed her hand in his to bid him farewell before starting for the station on her way to Ivy Towers, the home of the Trevors.

She was looking a trifle paler than usual; but her pride made her calm and self-possessed, though her heart was inwardly raging at what she felt his heartless injustice.

"How have I offended him?" she asked herself. "It is cruel to make one feel oneself so in the wrong, and yet not explain why."

"Good-by!" she said, aloud. "I suppose this is for good?"

"Not for good. I shall be back to give you away. That will be my last duty, I suppose."

He looked up with a forced smile from his books. How dry and wearisome they were to him now! He seemed only to turn to them as a matter of routine.

"Oh, don't hurry your return on my account; a proxy will do quite as well. Good-by, Mr. Staunton!"

And she turned to go.

"Nora, child, not like that!" he cried, in a voice of stifled agony. "Merciful Heaven, I cannot bear it!" Then, recollecting himself, and trying to speak quietly, he said, "I shall miss my little ward when I come back. Nora, let me give you one kiss for good-by? I am your guardian, you know."

And, for the first time, he stooped and printed a kiss on the fair face which was so inexpressibly dear to him.

She crimsoned with a strange feeling of shyness, and the tears filled her eyes as she said, "Oh, guardy, why do you go? I cannot bear it. Please stay until—I am married."

"Nora, child, I dare not. Go, child, do not tempt me—I dare not stay with you. May Heaven protect you; and, Nora, if ever you need a friend, remember your father left you to me. Promise me you will not forget."

"I will not. Good-by, guardy!"

"Good-by, my darling!"

For a moment the strong man lost possession of himself, and caught the frightened girl in his arms; for the second time she felt his kiss on her face, and now knew for the first time what was the meaning of the word love, though she could not, at the same time, forget that she was bound to Will Trevor.

"Come, Nora—I am waiting," called out Mrs. Staunton; and she passed from the room, leaving her guardian, with his head bowed with bitter humiliation and heaviness of heart, alone to wrestle with the demon of passion that had overmastered him. Had she understood? Was it madness that made him think that for one moment she had yielded, with a feeling akin to his own, to that one brief embrace, which seemed to cut him off from all that had been, and to send him out a lonely stricken wanderer from the spot that she yet called home? Oh, God! there was misery, and yet such bitter, bitter joy, in the thought! Had she, perhaps, only realized for a moment that she could have loved him had there been no Will Trevor? But no; he would not wrong her so. She was brave and loyal, and had not understood. To her that one brief embrace had meant no more than the calm, passionless embrace of a father or a brother. She loved him, indeed, and her tender little heart had been hurt at his avoidance

of her; but more than that he would not believe. There was too much misery in the thought for her. Well, he had had a narrow escape—it would not do to run any more risks. He would go at once; and before Nora returned to Fairholme he would be far away under an African sun, trying to forget this folly, this mad love for a girl whom it was treachery for him to think of.

"Yes, I will come back to give you to Will Trevor; no proxy shall take my place, Nora. By then I will be able to look in your sweet face, and if you have doubted me now, you shall see then that I am true and good to you—the guardian chosen by your father to watch over his daughter's happiness. Fool that I have been—that I would almost feel joy to think how perilously near I was to break it!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A HEART STRUGGLE.

LIKE one in a dream Nora drove to the station, accompanied by Mrs. Staunton, listening to, and yet not seeming to hear, the words addressed to her. It was with a feeling of relief that she sunk back in the corner of her seat, as the train moved out of the station, and tried to recall what had happened. What was it that seemed suddenly to have transformed her whole world? She could not realize it, but only felt conscious of a strangely new and undefinable feeling of intense happiness, and yet of vague terror that something awful had happened. She was as one who has just experienced one of those strange phases of mind when we become conscious of a dim recollection of the past or a foreshadowing of events to come, and yet cannot grasp its full meaning. She only knew that Mr. Staunton was going away, and yet that he had not lost his old love for her.

To say that she fully understood the nature of his regard would be quite wrong; but the thrill that had passed through her whole being as she felt his kiss on her brow, and heard his passionate "my darling," had been the awakening of a woman's feelings in her, and made her conscious, in a vague sort of way, of a possibility of a love as far removed from that of hers to Will Trevor as heaven is from earth.

During the whole of the journey her thoughts recurred to the brief incident, and it was not until they were within a few minutes of their destination that she remembered Will would be there to meet her, and then, for the first time in her life, she wished she could defer that meeting. She wanted to be alone, and enjoy this sweet consciousness that had so suddenly seemed to glorify her life.

But the inevitable moment came, and with it Will and Agnes waiting on the platform to receive her; and with a strong effort to master her feeling of repulsion, she responded as warmly as she could to his hearty welcome. In the bustle and excitement of arrival, the pleasure at seeing old friends, she almost forgot the new self, and relapsed into the merry-hearted, unconscious girl that they knew so well; but yet ever and anon an odd feeling of loneliness and dissatisfaction would overpower her, and she would wonder at her own lack of enthusiasm.

Will, for his part, was too genuinely pleased to have her again by his side to notice any constraint on hers, and laughed and joked until Nora became almost tired of him, and longed to get away to enjoy a little quiet.

It was the same all the evening. Try as she would, she was conscious of a wish to avoid Will's society, and did all in her power to avoid a *tête-à-tête* with him; and in the gayest party, where she herself formed the center of fun and amusement, she was conscious of a longing for the quiet, dimly-lighted drawing-room at Fairholme, and saw mentally Mr. and Mrs. Staunton seated by the fire, engaged one with his book and the other with her knitting.

"I wonder if they miss me?" she would think; and then remembered, with an odd sinking of the heart, that she would never again form one of the quietly happy trio.

"Come and look at the moon, Nora," cried Will, awakening her from the momentary reverie. "It's almost as bright as daylight. The ice will be splendid to-morrow!"

She did as he asked her. It was a glorious night; but somehow it recalled that evening when she had been looking out into the bright starry sky, and Launce had come to thank her for her song, and a wild longing to return to Fairholme seized her as Will continued:

"We shall have a splendid time for skating! I haven't cared to go on until I had you. How well we always get on together, don't we?"

"Yes, Will,"—very quietly.

"Just as we shall get on in everything. You

and I were made for each other, dearest. It would be a hard fate that should separate us now."

Good Heaven! what made her shudder so at his words? Will had often spoken so before. His love was no new matter to her, and yet she felt guilty of a horrible treachery in letting him speak so. Were they really bound to one another? If so, the chain would be likely to prove a galling one to her. Will was tender and more affectionate than ever, and seemed only anxious to assure her, by his every look and action, of the tenderness of his love for her. He looked more settled of purpose and more self-reliant than he had ever been before; and yet, school herself as she would, Nora felt the greatest distaste for his society.

"What has come to me?" she cried, as she tossed wakefully about in her bed. "Is it possible that I am going to dislike poor old Will after all? I must get over this horrid feeling of aversion. It is so hateful—so fickle! And he is so stanch and true! What would guardy think of me if he knew how soon I had changed? I know he thinks a woman should 'thank Heaven fasting for a good man's love.' And Will is good and true to me, and so will I be to him."

And, with this resolution, she fell into a light, uneasy slumber as the great hall clock struck the hour of five.

"Come, Nora," cried Will, entering the drawing-room, where she, occupied with letter-writing, was sitting alone. "Every one else is down on the ice, and I have been waiting for you this half-hour."

"Don't wait any longer," she said. "I will join you as soon as I can, but I must finish my letters first."

"Scribble them off anyhow, then," he returned. "It isn't likely I am going without you. I feel that I have an exclusive right to your attention for the next few days. You won't be bothered by me for a long time again, little darling!"

The bugbear examination was over, and he was going to join his class ten days after Christmas.

"You don't bother, Will; but I think I shall finish my letters quicker without you," said Nora, feeling it impossible to write with him standing at her elbow.

"Leave them, then, till this afternoon. To whom are you writing of so much importance?"

"To Fairholme," was the reply. "I must write for to-morrow."

"Oh, nonsense! It's much more necessary that you should come out with me. I won't have you sticking indoors, writing duty-letters, when other people are enjoying themselves."

"They are not duty-letters, Will. I like to write."

"I don't like you to, though," replied the autocratic Will. "Staunton and his dragon of a mother have quite enough of you when you are at Fairholme. Do let's forget them, and be jolly while we can."

"I do not want to forget them, for I love them dearly."

"It's more than I do, then," was the response. "But wonders will never cease if Nora has learned to love the tamer's rod. I shall expect you to grow as prim and precise as Agnes next."

Nora colored with vexation, and she rose and put away her writing materials, determining to leave the ice soon enough to enable her to finish her letters in time for the afternoon post. She was very quiet as they walked side by side down to the lake, and Will felt afraid that he had offended her.

"You're not vexed with me, Nora?" he asked, deprecatingly.

"Yes, I am, Will. I know I used to laugh with you at Mrs. Staunton; but somehow I think we understand each other better now, and I feel sorry that I ever did so."

"Well, don't be vexed any more, and no one shall speak with more reverence than I. I wouldn't really vex you for the world, Nora, you know, and as long as it's only Mrs. Staunton that you object to being treated with a want of respect, I don't mind; but don't ask me to join you in admiring her model son. Launce Staunton is a stick, and I hate him!"

"For shame, Will!" and the angry blood rushed to her face, and for the moment she almost felt that she loathed her companion. "You have no right to speak so of a man who is so immeasurably your superior."

"Come, now, Nora, that is too strong!"—and for a moment Will's good natured face was also darkened by an angry flush. "At any rate, you have no right to say such a thing. Launce

Staunton may be my superior, but at the same time I have no wish to resemble him."

"The more pity for you!" trembled on Nora's tongue, but she restrained herself, and walked silently on.

In a few moments Will's ebullition of anger was over, and he said, wistfully:

"Nora, don't let us spoil these few days with wrangling. Think as well of Mr. Staunton as you will, but remember your promise to me, and that I love you, dearest, better—far better—than any one else in the world."

Her own anger melted away at these words, and she felt keenly remorseful for her sharp language.

"Forgive me, Will," she said gently. "I was wrong, too."

Soon they were gliding swiftly hand-in-hand over the smooth ice; and the sharp exercise, combined with the brilliant sunlight, the merry sounds of laughter and talking around her, and the warmly-admiring looks of bystanders, made her forget the newly-felt pain and perplexity which had beset her.

"Nora," said Agnes, as the two were brushing their hair before the grate fire in their bedroom that night, "I hope you will try and persuade Will to be quiet and less extravagant when he joins his class again than he was before. He gave papa a great deal of anxiety then."

"I think Will wants to do right now," said Nora, with a sigh, reflecting how implicitly every one took it for granted that she was to keep him straight.

During the evening Mr. Trevor had managed to say quietly to her: "You are my boy's guardian angel, Nora! I never saw a young fellow so changed in my life!"

She had smiled in return, and the approbation had been grateful to her, and yet his words made the same cold, dissatisfied feeling return, and the thought passed through her mind that no one seemed to realize that she would need any support from her future husband. It was she who was to lead and strengthen him. Surely, she told herself when Agnes had been sleeping calmly for hours, while she in vain tried to follow her example, she ought to feel glad and happy that her influence was so great, and that she could do Will so much good. And yet her heart told her that this was not so.

The days passed quickly on to the New Year. A grand ball was given on New Year's Eve, and Will was in higher spirits even than usual as he danced in the New Year with Nora, and whispered in her ear: "Next year, Nora, it will be different. I shall hold you here forever then—never let you go again! It is only that thought that reconciles me to the thought of parting now."

A violent shudder passes through her frame as she feels his arm tighten its grasp, and she longs to break away, and get alone to wrestle with the awful feeling of aversion. Is she really growing to hate him? And she looks with eyes full of dismay and terror at the handsome, stalwart form of her lover, which attracts the admiring and not unenvious gaze of many a fair dancer who would willingly have accepted the attentions of the young heir of Ivy Towers.

Will looked down into those eyes, his own brimful of love and happiness, and noticed the strange look.

"Nora, what is the matter?" he cried. "Are you not well?"

"Yes, quite well," she said, hastily. "Only a little tired."

"Let us sit down, then," he said.

"No, no; we must finish the dance."

Anything was better than sitting down alone with him with that hateful loathing in her heart, and with a powerful effort she overcame the feeling sufficiently to laugh and chatter gayly with all comers. There was no one there with sufficient acuteness to see that the exuberant mirth was forced, to hear the hollow ring in the seemingly merry laughter.

Next morning brought a few short lines from Launce. They were very brief and guarded, and yet Nora's eyes filled with tears as she read and re-read them. He merely wished her a Happy New Year, and expressed a feeling of regret that he should not be there to welcome her on her return to Fairholme, but trusted that she and his mother would be good companions.

"Gone!—gone!" moaned Nora, her heart aching with an inexpressible loneliness. "Oh, guardy, what shall I do without you? I never knew that I loved you so!"

She was so absorbed in her grief that she had not noticed Will's approach, and he now drew near, grieved and surprised to find her in

tears. Not unnaturally, he attributed it to grief at his own departure, which was to take place on the following day, and tried his best to comfort her.

With a heart-sick feeling of contempt for the deception she felt that she was practicing, Nora escaped from him as soon as she could, and in the privacy of her own room went through the now familiar struggle of trying to overcome her growing repugnance to her engagement.

CHAPTER IX.

LOVE ME LITTLE LOVE ME LONG.

THE first few days of February had already passed away before Nora returned to Fairholme. How lonely and deserted seemed the place without its master! Even Boss and Tartar seemed to be conscious of the change, and welcomed their old friend back with a very depressed air, as though they could scarcely realize that such a thing as a long ramble was ever in store for them again.

For the first time in her life, Mrs. Staunton was ailing. She had caught a severe cold, which had turned to bronchitis, and Nora found her confined to her room.

"Why didn't you let me know?" she cried reproachfully. "I would have come back at once."

"It was not of much consequence, my dear; and I did not like to curtail your enjoyment. Barton has been very attentive, and nursed me admirably."

But though she spoke thus quietly, the old lady was secretly gratified at Nora's concern, and made no objection to her assuming the post of head nurse now that she had returned. That everything went smoothly we are scarcely prepared to affirm; but Nora had grown so quiet and subdued in manner, that there was seldom any cause for the old irritating marks of disapprobation, and Mrs. Staunton had begun to understand the depths in the girl's nature which had before been hidden from her.

As the spring came on, she was able to leave her room, but had lost much of her old vigor, and Nora saw that she looked with almost painful eagerness for letters from her absent son, although she never expressed any anxiety for his return. The letters came very regularly, and Nora was always privileged to read them; but they seemed to her meager and unsatisfactory, although they gave a tolerably detailed account of the wanderer's journeyings and sight-seeings.

From Will she heard regularly, and the terms of trusting, out-spoken love which formed the greater part of his letters made her heart ache, and caused her to resolve ever anew to overcome her own coldness. She was also not free from anxiety on his account, for from Ivy Towers came letters indicating disapprobation at his conduct.

A letter of remonstrance soon brought the culprit post-haste to Fairholme to try and restate himself in her good opinion, and Nora shrunk back with fear and apprehension as he came in with a sunny, loving smile, so confident of her affection and truth.

"What have they been saying about me, little monitor?" he asked, as soon as the first greeting was over, and they were alone. "I know that I should not have been honored by such sage advice had not some one been putting into your head that I was going to the dogs."

"Not quite so bad as that, Will," she said, with a faint smile. "But I do not like to hear of your causing your father anxiety, because I know that he is so easy-going that he overlooks a great deal. I really did not like to write, but Agnes and Mrs. Trevor asked me to, and I thought it my duty."

"Well, now you've discharged your duty, and I have come to tell you that it is all right, I am to be forgiven?"

"I have nothing to forgive, Will. You must act properly—for your own sake, not for mine."

"Nora, I shall never do anything for any one's sake but yours."

His words were like the striking of the clock to a doomed man, for she felt that they made escape from her miserable position impossible. If only she did not feel so sure of his love, it would be so much easier to tell him that her own for him could never be otherwise than that of a sister. The strength of her misery made her speak impatiently.

"Don't harp on the old subject, Will. You are a man, and ought to stand by yourself. Do you expect me always to be your keeper?"

"Nora, what can you mean?"

"Forgive me, Will; I did not mean to be cross."

"You did not mean it, Nora, darling?—you

are not tired of me? I could bear anything but that!"

And Nora reproached herself more bitterly than ever. Why—oh, why could she not love him? Will was far better than in the old days, and then she had never shrunk from him as now. She remembered the time when a long day with him was one of the chief delights of her existence.

"Nora, darling," he continued, sitting down by her side, and drawing her to him, while she, still reproaching herself for her unkindness, did not dare to resist, although his caressing arm seemed like a cruel vise—"Nora, darling, you must trust me. If I had done anything really wrong, do you think I could have come down here and looked into your dear face? But when I am with all the other fellows, and you are so far away, it is hard to be altogether steady. Besides, you must remember that every young fellow has to left off steam occasionally, and the governor isn't quite so easy as you think. I don't spend half as much as some fellows do. If it weren't for you, he would have found it very different, I can tell you."

"Will, sometimes I think,"—she hesitated, and yet felt she must speak—"sometimes I think—I am afraid—that you and I are too young. It might be better for you—"

"To go to the devil!" he interrupted, passionately, springing up and glaring down on her from his great height as she cowered conscience-stricken before him. "I beg your pardon for the expression, but that is what I really mean. It's of no use to argue the question. I can't do without you, Nora. Do you mean to ruin me, body and soul, or is this only a miserable pretense to threaten me into good behavior? Oh, Nora, I am humble enough!" bending down again, and taking her icy hand in his. "I will promise everything if you will never suggest such a thing again. Ask what you will, and I will be precise as Staunton himself; but don't speak about our being too young or unfit to be engaged."

It must be, then. She would strive no more, but would try to bear it as best she might; and yet she almost hated him when he brought in the name of the person she most honored on earth, as though to resemble him were the highest sacrifice he could bring her. She could not speak, and only passively resisted as Will resumed his place beside her, and tried to draw her again into his arms.

"Nora, never say that again!" he pleaded earnestly, kissing her throbbing, aching brow; "for I will never let you go, and I cannot think that you really wish it! I shall write to Staunton, and tell him that I think our engagement ought to be publicly announced. It isn't fair to either of us."

"Oh, no, Will; not yet. There are only a few months."

"A few months! Oh, Nora, they seem like years to me! I wonder if you ever long for the time when we shall always be together as I do. But no, you can't,"—resentfully—"or you would never speak so calmly of our being too young."

"Will, dear, you make me feel quite ashamed when you speak so. I do not deserve so much love."

"Never mind about that, dearest. I think you deserve anything, especially if you will only try to love me as I want you to. You are the best, the purest, the dearest, and most beautiful little darling in the world!"

Each adjective was emphasized by a shower of lover-like kisses, to which she submitted with a calm exterior, but an inward yearning to escape from this love, which seemed to threaten her whole future with darkness and misery.

Will was very patient, and, for a young lover, not very exacting; but even he felt that the slight form he pressed so passionately to his breast might have given more token of life and feeling. He withdrew his arm with something of the feeling that one might do if one had been betrayed into the folly of embracing a beautiful statue with a hope of receiving a like warm return.

Nora noticed the action, and tried to make amends by a renewed lovingness and gentleness of manner during the remainder of his stay.

CHAPTER X.

A CRUEL BLOW.

In the excess of her penitence for her ungraciousness of the afternoon, Nora had seconded Mrs. Staunton's invitation to Will to prolong his stay until the following Monday, and had therefore to endure the agony of a constant restraint of her real feelings. It was the first time that she had ever been called upon to

undergo such an ordeal, and she shudderingly asked herself how she would be able to endure such a state of mind forever. Could it be possible that she was doomed for life to bear a love which, try as she might, awoke no responsive echo in her own breast? She must, she would love Will again as she had done in the old days.

It so happened that a business matter with one of their lawyers made it necessary the next morning for Mrs. Staunton to see some of the papers left in her son's secretary, and according to her wont, in the altered state of her relations with Nora, she asked her to make search for them.

"You are sure to find them," she said. "Launce told me that he should leave them there."

With a strange feeling, Nora obeyed, and entered the study for the first time since her return from Ivy Towers. It was with an indescribable feeling of awe that she sat down in the place of the absent master to fulfil her task.

Overcome with the recollections and a sense of her own utter loneliness, Nora leaned her head down on the desk and sobbed as though her heart would break.

"Oh, guardy, come back to me!" she cried. "No one ever loved me or helped me as you did!"

It was some time before she regained the mastery of herself, and remembered what she had come for. Then, drying her wet eyes, she began her work. The search was a longer one than she had anticipated, and she had to turn out one drawer after another.

At length the missing roll of papers was discovered, and she was proceeding to rearrange the secretary, when she was startled by a small compartment, hitherto unnoticed, springing open.

"It must be a secret drawer," she thought, and tried to reclose it; but as she did so, the contents caught her eye, filling her with a strange thrill of wonder and excitement.

Side by side lay the sketch which Mr. Staunton had captured so long ago; a few faded flowers, which she remembered to have put in his button-hole on the day of the picnic, and a photograph of herself.

With a stifled sob, Nora dropped upon her knees, and kissed the passionless, irresponsible desk, as though she must make amends for all her past blindness. In a moment the veil was torn away from the past, and she knew it all now.

Launce Staunton had loved her, and had gone away to conquer that love; and she—oh, merciful Heaven! she loved him now it was too late, even as Will loved her.

"Come, Nora, haven't you found them yet?" cried Will, putting his head in at the door. "I haven't got much longer, so be quick!"

"Go into the garden, Will. I will come to you there."

She spoke as calmly as she could, for her heart and brain told her that she must have a few minutes for reflection before she could fulfil the task before her. That it must be done she knew, and yet with all the force of her sensitive nature she shrunk from the pain she was about to inflict.

"Better, better so," she murmured. "Better the present pain than the lasting misery. Ah, Will, had it only been that I did not love you, I would have married you! But now? Oh, no, I cannot—I cannot!"

And yet, to make him understand that her decision was irrevocable, without letting him know what she herself had but just learned,—that was the difficulty, for Nora knew well that Will would not accept his dismissal very readily.

"Why," she asked herself bitterly, "had she learnt it at all now, seeing that it would be a source of misery to her? Launce would come back, indifferent and heart-free, or, at any rate, free from her, and he would never know that she had loved him! How should she bear it?"

But she went into the garden to join Will, who was growing impatient at the delay. He saw at once that something was amiss, and, drawing her arm within his, asked, "What is it, Nora? Have you bad news?"

She tried to answer, but the attempt was too much for her, and she burst into a fit of uncontrollable hysterical weeping.

Will was alarmed, and tried to soothe her by every endearment he could think of. But for some time his efforts were unavailing, and she sobbed convulsively each time she tried to speak.

By degrees, however, she grew calm, and let Will draw her to a seat in a shady corner of the flower-garden. Then, pressing the palms of her hands closely together, and nervously interlac-

ing her fingers, she began, "Will, I have something to say to you, and you must hear me out quietly. It is better for us both to get it over."

"Say on, Nora," he said, gloomily, with a foreboding of what was coming; and yet adding, "But don't say that you are going to give me up, for I can't bear that."

"I am not going to give you up, Will," she said, pointedly. "But I am going to appeal to your generosity. Will, I have tried to love you, and I can't—at least, not in the way I ought if I married you."

"Dearest, I know you do not love me as I do you, but I do not expect it. I will be contented with ever such a little bit of your heart; and you do not hate me, Nora?"

"Hate you? Oh, Will! I love you dearly—at least, I should if you would but let me feel free again. It has all been a dreadful mistake! I did not know what love was like; and when you loved me, it seemed so right that I should make you happy."

"And how should you know now?" he asked quickly.

"I am older, Will," she answered, faintly. "Oh, Will, be kind to me! I know I never ought to have given you hope; but I did not understand, and I thought I could love you."

She looked beseechingly into his face, but he turned away, and Nora saw that, strong man as he was, his eyes were full of tears, and his voice was choked with sobs as he answered: "What is it in me that is so hateful? Am I so utterly unlovable?"

"Oh, no, Will; you are not unlovable. It is my heart that is so hard that I cannot love." She laughed bitterly at her own words. "Some day you will love some one else, who will be able to love you in return."

"Don't say that, Nora! No one can ever take your place. Don't send me away alone and heart-broken! I cannot give up hope! Darling, perhaps it is as you say, you are too young. I will wait years, half a lifetime, but don't make me give you up altogether! Some day the love will come."

"Not that love," she said, sadly. "When I try to love you, I think I almost hate you! Oh, dear, kind Will, how can I be so ungrateful? I wish I were dead and out of this misery!"

"Oh, Nora! Nora! It must be, then. You shall not hate me! I will give you back your freedom, but Heaven have pity on me!"

And he buried his face on the back of the seat, and Nora trembled as she saw that most pathetic of all sights, a strong man weeping.

"Don't say that!" she said, putting her little hand deprecatingly on his arm. "Will, look round and say you forgive me."

"Forgive you, my darling? I have nothing to forgive. You cannot help it. I was a presumptuous idiot ever to dream of possessing such a jewel as your love!"

"No, Will, you were not. I wish, with all my heart, I could give it you. But promise me that you will not do anything rash. Oh, Will, it would break my heart if I heard of your going wrong, and thought it was my fault. Be strong and true, and some day you will find one more worthy of your love than I."

"Nora, I will try. You shall not have cause to blush for the man who would have loved you to the end; who does and must love you, let you say or do what you will. But never think of my loving any one else. For where shall I find another Nora?"

Both felt that it was needless to prolong the painful meeting, and yet for Will to take his last look at the dearly-loved face seemed almost an impossibility.

"I cannot!" he cried, as he took her hands in his. "It cannot be all over between us, and that I must never see your face again!"

"It must be now, dear," she said, gently disengaging herself; "but not forever. Some day we shall meet again, and quite forget this sad, troubled chapter of our lives."

"I shall not forget. Nora, it is sad, but all that will ever be sweet in my life goes with it."

As she watched the receding dog-cart that bore him so swiftly away from her, and reflected how the heart which had ever been truly for her was aching now for her sake, her remorse, coupled with her own misery, was very great, and she felt an irresistible craving to pour out her grief into some sympathetic ear. It was so hard—so hard to bear it all alone.

When she re-entered the drawing-room, she found Mrs. Staunton busy with her letters, and sitting down quietly, tried to occupy herself with her book. But it was of no use. The letters swam before her eyes, and a half-stifled sob caused her companion to look round,

"Why, Nora! what is this? Are you in trouble?"

Scarcely knowing what she did, the worn, miserable girl flung herself on her knees, and burying her face in Mrs. Staunton's dress, cried: "It is all over between us! I have told Will I can't love him; and I think my heart is breaking!"

CHAPTER XI.

HER UNTOLD SECRET.

To say that Mrs. Staunton was surprised at this unexpected revelation would weakly describe her feelings of amazement. That Nora had dreamed of ending her engagement had never occurred to her; and now the sudden confession, coupled with the girl's excited manner and evident trouble, perplexed her sorely.

"Tell me all about it," she said, trying to speak soothingly, and raising the drooping form from its dejected position. "Have you had some lovers' dissension? You must not act rashly, child!"

"We have had no quarrel," said Nora. "And, indeed, I have not acted lightly. I am very, very much ashamed, but I could not help it. It was all a mistake, and I dared not let it go any further!"

"Does Mr. Trevor concur in your opinion?" still perplexed at the girl's distress.

"Not now; but he will, I feel sure; he will see that it is better. I dared not marry him when I found that I could not love him!"

"Well, well, my dear, the mistake is better found out now than later. Meanwhile, I am glad that there was no formal engagement."

The confession once over, Nora was calmer, and listened quietly to Mrs. Staunton's words, though some of them were torture to her, and seemed to probe her wounded, weary heart to its very depths. She was sinking into a sort of apathetic despair when the old lady, taking up a letter from the table, put it into her hand, and said: "See, here is some good news for us both! Launce is coming home! Read this letter, my dear! You have been a true little comforter in my loneliness, and I know you will be the first to rejoice in my joy at having my son again."

Of all the stiff, yet heartfelt words, Nora heard nothing, though at another time they would have given her pleasure.

"Launce is coming home!" How those words ran in her brain, filling it with a medley of indescribable thoughts. "Launce is coming home!" How would he come? Had he forgotten her? Would he smile upon her as in the past? She would see him, hear his voice, feel the pressure of his hand. But—and her heart stood still with fear—what would he say when he knew what she had done? He would think her cruel, fickle, wayward, not knowing her own heart, and reckless of the pain she gave others. How would she bear his cold look of disapprobation? He had loved her, but the love would be dead and buried when he lost all sense of trust in her honor. Launce at home, and yet so far from her, would be worse than Launce separated by the ocean's swelling tide.

No wonder that it was some moments before she could read the words in the well-known writing; but as at length she did so, her whole attention was concentrated on them, and each word, each stroke, seemed like a dagger at her heart. It ran thus, and was dated from Alexandria:—

"DEAR MOTHER:—

"You will be surprised, and I dare say not displeased, to hear that I shall reach Fairholme almost as soon as you receive this. I am just on the eve of my departure, and am bringing you a visitor. Do you remember Audrey Ventnor? I have met her out here, at the other side of the world, and heard the end and reason of the story which perplexed us all so long ago. Poor girl! I feel ashamed when I think how we have wronged her, and hope to be able to make some reparation. Surely, she is one of the noblest creatures on God's earth! But it is a long story, and as time presses, I will defer it till I see you. Meanwhile, I will tell you that her father is dead, and that she is alone in the world, and that I have asked her in your name to consider Fairholme as her own home as long as she wants one. I know I need not ask you to welcome her, for you always loved her, and believed in her when we did not. Love to Nora. Audrey has heard all about her, and sends love. She is quite anxious to make her acquaintance, and hopes with me that her course of love, though true, runs smooth. Trusting to see you, ere long,

"Your affectionate son,

"LAUNCE STAUNTON."

He was coming, yet Nora longed to be able to avoid him. He had forgotten her. Had he ever really loved her? Had she not made another awful mistake? What had she,

after all, to assure her that he ever had loved her, though only ten minutes before she had felt so confident of it? Ah, well! she was punished now for all, for her treatment of Will and her own self-deceit, for she loved him now for good or for ill, come what would. He hoped to find her still engaged to Will, that her course of love ran smooth; and he had even spoken of her to that woman, Audrey Ventnor; "the noblest creature on God's earth!" Of course he loved her; she saw it all. The long story, whose telling he deferred, would have its end when Launce Staunton introduced his affianced wife, the future mistress of Fairholme.

"I cannot see him now," she moaned. "I have been such a fool! And that woman! How dare she send patronizing messages to me! I hate her—I hate her! But what an idiot I am! Why should I hate her because she has seen and prized what I was so blind as to pass by? But surely he did love me? I cannot be mistaken there, although it may be that it was only a passing fancy. Oh, why did I ever become conscious of it, if it was only to be tortured like this?"

She could think no more, nor weep, nor even moan. With a dazed, almost stupefied look she sat immovably still, staring with a stony gaze at the pale, miserable-looking reflection of herself, until at last the dressing-bell rung, and she was disturbed by the entrance of her maid.

Then she aroused herself, and feeling that for the first time in her life she had a part to play, and that at all hazards she must, at any rate, bide her folly and misery from the world, dressed and joined Mrs. Staunton in the drawing-room.

The next week a telegram announced that the travelers had arrived in New York, and would reach Fairholme that evening. It had come, then; only a few hours more!

Nora heard the news with the calmness of despair, and forced herself to appear to enter into Mrs. Staunton's natural joy.

"We have missed him, you and I, Nora," she said. "I am glad he has not stayed away very long."

"Yes," said Nora. "I am sure you must be glad that he is coming."

"I am, dear. We mothers are selfish creatures at the best; and at my time of life, when I cannot expect to stay with him much longer, it is a great grief to me for him to go away."

Some time before their arrival she crept to Mrs. Staunton's side, and said pleadingly, "Will you tell my guardian about yesterday? And please ask him not to speak to me about it. I cannot bear it."

"I will tell him, my dear. But are you confident of yourself that you really wish the affair to be at an end? I am afraid you are suffering."

"Oh, no, no! I am only sorry for Will's sake. I can never love him! Please never say anything more about it."

And she looked so agonized and entreating, that Mrs. Staunton could feel that she was in earnest, and promised that she would tell Launce what she wished, but that he must decide for himself which was the best course to pursue.

Every tick of the large clock on the mantelshelf seemed the echo of a heart's throb, and Nora could almost have shrieked with agony as she watched the pendulum regularly and inexorably oscillate. Everything was going on with its usual routine only she seemed out of keeping with it all, and to find discord, jangling and confusion where all had once been harmony. At that moment so great was the tension of her nervous system that she really thought she must be going mad, and it was with veritable relief that at last the long-awaited sounds struck on her ear and she realized that he had come.

She could not move, she did not even rise to meet him as Launce entered the room with a tall dark lady who went with him up to his mother, awaiting them both with open arms of welcome.

"Thank Heaven that you have come back safely, my boy!" was her tremulous, heartfelt greeting; and then she turned round to the other comer, and said, "I will not believe it necessary for me to tell you, Audrey, how welcome you are to Fairholme, but now that you have come back to us at last I hope we shall long have the pleasure of keeping you here."

How happy they were among themselves! What did she, an intruder, do in such a thorough home-scene? Nora's eyes were eagerly bent on the new-comer, as these bitter thoughts filled her heart, and she could not but acknowledge that she had never seen a more striking person than that pale, dark woman with deep-set gray eyes and regularly white teeth, which gleamed

beautifully when she smilingly answered Mrs. Staunton's warm words.

"And this is my ward!" said Launce, at length turning to and presenting her to Miss Ventnor. "You see, Nora, I am back in time for the wedding. I hope you and Audrey will be great friends."

"I hope you will let it be so," said the latter, gently taking Nora's hand and kissing her broad white brow. "Launce has told me so much of you, that it does not seem that we are strangers."

"Thank you; you are very kind!" said Nora, scarcely lifting her eyes from the ground, feeling that another moment's repression must drive her mad.

This was all too awful, too humiliating! She must have been mistaken; Launce had never really loved her. She laughed at the idea when she looked at the graceful, regal bearing of Audrey Ventnor, and remembered her own diminutive appearance. If she had only seen her before, she would have been spared the miserable folly of ever believing that Launce could have loved her.

But she was undeceived now; his manner was unmistakable; and she only longed to escape from the group, which seemed so perfect in itself, that her own loneliness seemed so much the more unbearable.

As soon as she could she withdrew, unconscious that Launce's eyes were following her to the door.

"Nora looks very ill, mother," he said. "I never saw any one so changed in my life. Is she unwell?"

"She does look pale to night," was the response; "but I am not surprised. She was very much agitated the other day, and has not yet got over it."

"Is she in trouble?" And even Nora could not have thought that there was any indifference in that quick, anxious tone.

"I believe only a passing one. She has concluded that it is best to break off her engagement with Mr. Trevor."

"Break off her engagement!" And Launce started out of his chair with astonishment, while his eyes met those of Audrey Ventnor bent on him with a strange smile. "For what reason? Has he neglected her?"

"Oh, no; she feels that she has made a mistake, and that she does not love him sufficiently. I cannot but believe that she speaks truly, though her present suffering would seem to suggest something more."

"Mother, have you watched rightly? Are you sure that he has not trifled with her happiness?" There was a vehement eagerness in his voice, and he was striding rapidly up and down.

"Quite sure, Launce! Mr. Trevor has shown no diminution in his love, but I fancy Nora has for some time experienced a sense of dissatisfaction."

"But why this sorrow? The child looks utterly miserable! I must speak to her myself!"

"Nora asked me to tell you of this, and at the same time to beg you not to speak to her about it," said his mother.

"But I cannot let it rest. We know how high-spirited she is, and that she may be imperiling her own happiness when a little timely interference might set all straight."

"I believe that she is quite sincere in the reason she gives. And, after all, her suffering may be the result of the remorse she must feel for the pain she has occasioned Mr. Trevor."

"Will you trust me to find out, Launce?" broke in Audrey Ventnor's quiet voice. "Perhaps she will confide in me if we get on well together."

His eyes looked his thanks, and taking her hand, he said:

"How shall I ever be grateful enough to you, Audrey? You are but adding another to the load of benefits I can never repay!"

Nora was just re-entering the room, and overheard his words—noting, too, the action which accompanied them, and abruptly closing the door, fled to her own room, where she locked the door, and at length found relief for her overcharged heart in a storm of passionate sobs.

CHAPTER XII.

LOVE'S REWARD.

DURING the next few days Nora went about the house like a shadow of her former self, striving to appear gay and unconcerned. Launce watched her with great uneasiness; and had it not been for her repellent, reserved manner

to himself, would have found it hard to follow Audrey's advice not to speak to her.

Meanwhile Audrey had fallen naturally into a leading position; and even Nora was obliged to succumb to her gentle fascination, and to love, in spite of herself, the quiet, interesting-looking woman who smiled so sweetly on her. She fought against the feeling at first; but Audrey ignored all rebuffs, and was so gentle and unassuming, and yet so persistent, that Nora at length felt a relief to submit to her tender embrace.

"Come, Nora, dear, you must love me a little. I could love you dearly, if you would let me. I never had a sister, dear; but I liked always to fancy I had one, and I think my fancies always took the form of a fair young creature like you. We have so much in common, dear; for each of us is an orphan, and without any near relations. We ought to be friends."

"We will be," said Nora. "I do love you, and I will, but—"

"But what?" said Audrey, smiling. "There must be no 'but' to our friendship. You are going to be my little sister; and, to begin with, I am not going to let my little sister have a trouble eating away her heart in secret. What is it, Nora, dear? I should scarcely recognize you for the light-hearted young thing your guardian told me about."

"I am quite happy," persisted Nora. "I suppose I am getting older."

"Not old enough to have such a hollow ring in your laugh and voice. Eighteen, or eighty either, is not old enough for that. Mayn't I know it, dear?"

"You know it all," said Nora. "I dare say they have told you what a fickle, shallow-hearted thing I am." And her voice trembled with sobs.

"No one has told me any such untruth," said Audrey, putting her arm round her with great tenderness, and looking into the sweet, troubled brown eyes with her own calm gray ones. "So that is the trouble? You are afraid that your friends think the less of you because you have refused to marry Mr. Trevor?"

"Oh, if only I could make people understand!" And the long-repressed tears burst forth.

Audrey let her weep on undisturbed, for she knew it would bring ease to her overcharged heart and brain. Presently the sobs grew calmer, and then she said: "I think, dear, we do understand. We feel that you allowed yourself to be persuaded into an engagement which your more matured judgment could not approve of. Naturally you feel much pain for Mr. Trevor's disappointment. Is this not so?"

"Yes—yes," said Nora. "And you do think I was right?"

"Certainly, dear, if you cannot love him. But tell me, was this conviction a sudden one, or had you thought it possible before?"

Nora flushed as she answered:

"It was sudden at the last; but I had thought of it for a long time, and had been trying to make myself love him ever since—since—"

"Since when, dear?"

"Since I went to his home for Christmas. When I saw Will again, I found it all so different; but I didn't know then why it was. That only came by degrees."

"And you first felt this feeling of aversion when you went to Ivy Towers?"

There was a quiet smile round the corners of Audrey's mouth.

"Poor little girl, you must have been very unhappy. But you must not grieve any more now, for you know that you have really done the best thing for Mr. Trevor's own sake."

"But I wish I had never given way; it would have been so different then!" And the wistful look told its own sad tale.

"I am afraid this is not quite all," said Audrey.

"Have you nothing else to tell your sister, Nora?"

"Nothing more that I can tell," said Nora, with firmly set mouth; and Audrey saw that whatever else the girl had on her mind she meant to keep there.

But Audrey was satisfied, and presently sought Launce to let him know the result of her questioning.

"I put my own construction on it all," she said, with a quiet smile. "And let me tell you, Mr. Staunton, that you are a ridiculously short-sighted fellow to be intrusted with the guardianship of such a dear little creature."

For such a gentle woman, Audrey was vehemently indignant; but Launce took her reproof very quietly.

"I owe you a good turn for trying to put my mistakes right, Audrey," he said. "Perhaps

you have not been infallible; so I have been doing a little repairing of broken heart-strings on my own account."

"What do you mean, Launce?"

"He means this," said a man's deep voice behind her; and Audrey turned ashen white as she felt herself clasped to that man's breast, and heard him say, "Launce has told me all, Audrey, and I have come to claim my own after all these years. Send me away again if you dare!"

Launce quickly effaced himself, rightly feeling that the long-separated lovers would get over all their difficulties much better without his assistance. His own thoughts were full of what Audrey had told him about Nora.

"If I could but believe it!" he said. "But, no; it cannot be. There is something more than the remembrance of Will Trevor between us! I feel that my darling has changed in many ways, and that she avoids me! Is it the recollection of that one moment's forgetfulness, I wonder?"

His reverie was broken by the shadow of Nora's figure falling across his window as she passed on to the garden. He went to the casement, and looked at her. She had a scared, frightened look, and was pressing her hand to her side as though to still the beating of a violently throbbing heart.

"What is it, my little bird, now?" thought Launce, looking after her tenderly. "At any rate, she shall not suffer, and I make no effort to find the cause!" And he prepared to follow her into the flower-garden, whither she had fled to think over the strange sight which had revealed itself to her as she, unseen, had entered the drawing-room—Audrey Ventnor in the arms of a strange man, who was taking all the privileges of a lover with Launce's affianced wife! What could it mean? Was there no truth in the world?

"Have you seen a ghost, Nora?" asked Launce's voice from behind.

And turning round, she found herself *tete-a-tete* with her guardian for the first time since his return.

"Oh, no; ghosts don't walk in the daytime," she answered, trying to escape.

But he caught her with a restraining arm, and said: "But it is something, Nora; and I insist on knowing."

"Indeed, I cannot tell you!"

A dim light broke on him.

"Were you in the drawing-room?" he asked.

"Yes; but don't ask me anything more."

"I can tell you what you saw there," he said.

Audrey Ventnor and her lover. But what was there to frighten you, then?"

"You know, then?"

"Of course I know, considering that I brought Audrey Ventnor home for that very meeting."

"I thought—"

And she stopped.

"Well, what did you think?"

"That Audrey was going to marry you."

"To marry me! Good heavens! what put such an idea into your head? I am afraid, little Nora, that there is no woman who will marry me, since there is only one woman in the world that I love, and she dislikes and avoids me."

He was looking very earnestly into her face, which crimsoned under the searching gaze; yet she was not satisfied.

"But your letter—Mrs. Staunton said it was so," she continued.

"I think not," he said, quietly. "Listen, Nora; I will tell you the whole tale. When I left America, I went because a little woman, who had seemingly built up a barrier between me and her, was dearer to me than mother, home, or country, and, like a coward, I fled from the temptation of trying to win her love for my own. I was very sad and lonely, little Nora, and sometimes very bitter when I thought of what I had missed. In Egypt I met Audrey Ventnor, the daughter of an old school-fellow of my mother's, and an old and well-loved playmate of my own. But we had never been lovers, though my mother had wished it; and I knew, or thought I knew, that her heart was given to my friend, George Lacy, a young, struggling lawyer, but as good-hearted a fellow as ever lived. What was our surprise and grief when she suddenly jilted him, seemingly for no cause or reason, and went abroad with her father, a worthless old ne'er-do-weel, who only brought misery to all who came in contact with him. George was cut to the heart; but he bore it bravely, and rose in his profession. Only I, his friend, knew that the old sore was green as ever; and when out in Egypt, by her father's death-bed, I learnt Audrey's reason—knew that

she was more than worthy of him—you may be sure that I determined to bring them together. Nora, she had gone away like that because she knew that her father would only bring disgrace on and drag down the man she loved, and ever since had devoted herself to the old scapegrace, toiling with fingers and brain to support him in drunken, dissolute idleness. Oh, child, the story thrilled me; but my task was not an easy one, for Audrey is proud, and I knew she would not willingly meet the man in his prosperity whom she had rejected in his poverty. And so I brought her here, and wrote to George Lacy to let him know the jewel that awaited his gathering. You have seen their meeting, and now you will understand that I was not surprised."

Nora had listened with mute, sympathetic attention, her tears flowing softly all the while.

"Good, noble Audrey!" she began; "and you—oh, Mr. Staunton, how grateful she will be to you!"

"The balance of gratitude is on my side," he said, taking her little hand in his. "Nora, I haven't told you all yet. We men are poor creatures. When we've got a hurt we must cry out, and there is something in Audrey that makes one confide in her. At any rate, she found out my secret, and I think it was she who made me feel how unmanly it was to run away from home duties and my old mother because I could not bear to look on another man's happiness. But when we came back I found that matters had changed. This indefatigable peace-maker told me that I had been making a fool of myself, and that I had been an idiot to go away and leave my little charge to fight for herself. She told me—and oh, my little Nora, did she tell me truly?—that in our last parting I had awakened in you the first consciousness of love; and that during our separation this had gone on growing until my little darling is really able to bestow her love on her poor old guardian. Is it so, sweet? Darling, can you really love me?"

Nora's head had sunk deeper and deeper on her breast as Launce proceeded, and now for answer she hid the sweet face suffused with burning blushes in his waistcoat.

"Look up once, my darling," he urged, "and say, 'I love you.'"

"I love you, Launce," whispered the trembling lips; "I love you, Launce," said the beaming eyes; and "I love you, Launce," echoed the beating heart which had forgotten all its pain and sorrow, and felt so at rest in the strength of this new great love and the assurance of his.

"Ah, darling! would that we had known sooner!" he said. "Little one, if you but knew how my heart ached with yearning for you when you were so unconscious!"

"Oh, Launce, how could you love me so when I was so young and foolish, and you so—"

"Old and wise," he interrupted, laughingly.

"Ah, Nora, we cannot understand these things! I only know that I loved you from the first moment that I went and found you in grief, and that I loved you when you came here, rebellious and willful, determining to show us how little you cared for us."

"Oh, no, no!" she cried. "I always cared, but I pretended not to; and when you taught me to love and honor you, it was not very hard to obey."

"Was I such a tyrant, darling? I always meant to be tender to you."

"You were always good, Launce, and I loved you better for making me choose the right, and disapproving when I went wrong. That was why I was so miserable when you went away. I felt so lonely and weak; but I did not know then that I loved you. I only knew that I was unhappy, and that poor Will was not a bit dear to me. It made me, oh, so wretched, and I struggled against it with all my heart!"

"Poor sweet one! But I cannot but be glad that you did not succeed. I could not spare your love, dear one, now."

"Nor I yours, oh, Launce! We are so happy now that I can't think that I was ever miserable; and yet half an hour ago I thought that my heart was breaking!"

"Ah, it is in safe keeping now!" said Launce, kissing again the sweet lips. "And with this kiss I vow that it shall be well kept, as I charge you to keep mine!"

THE END.

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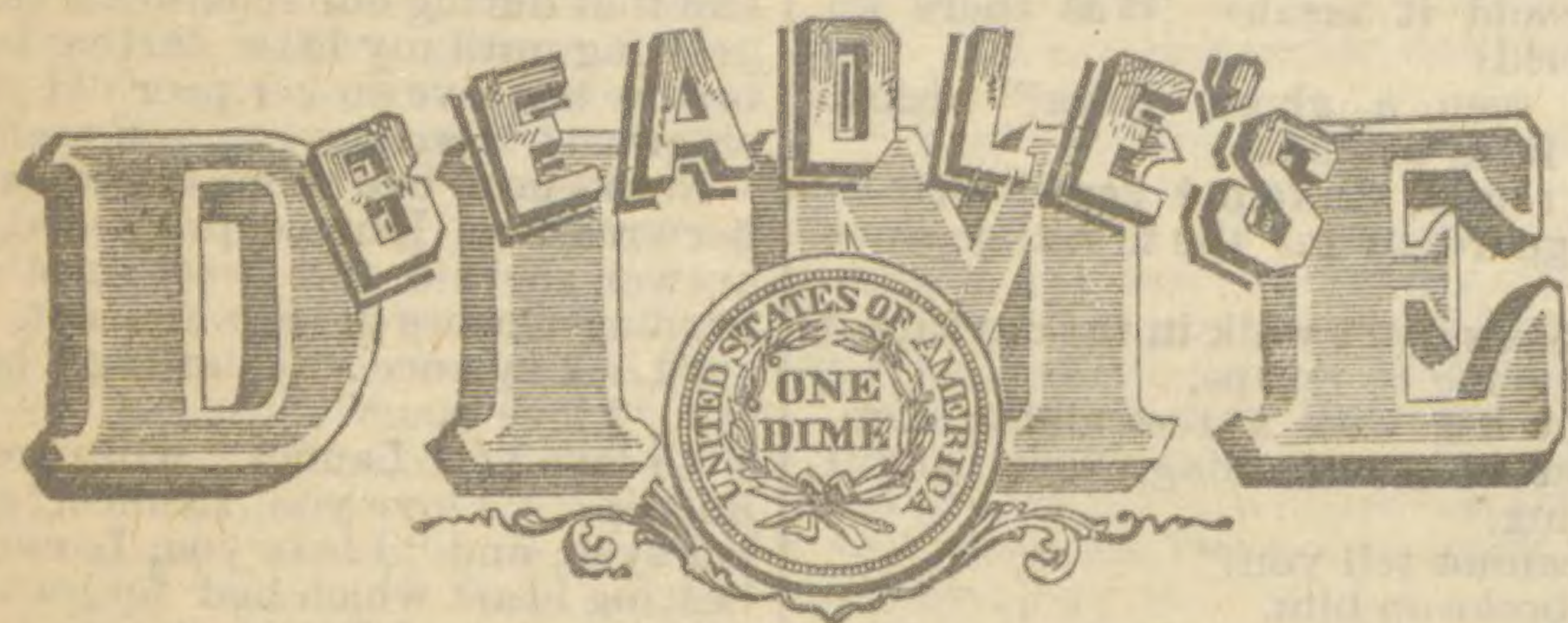
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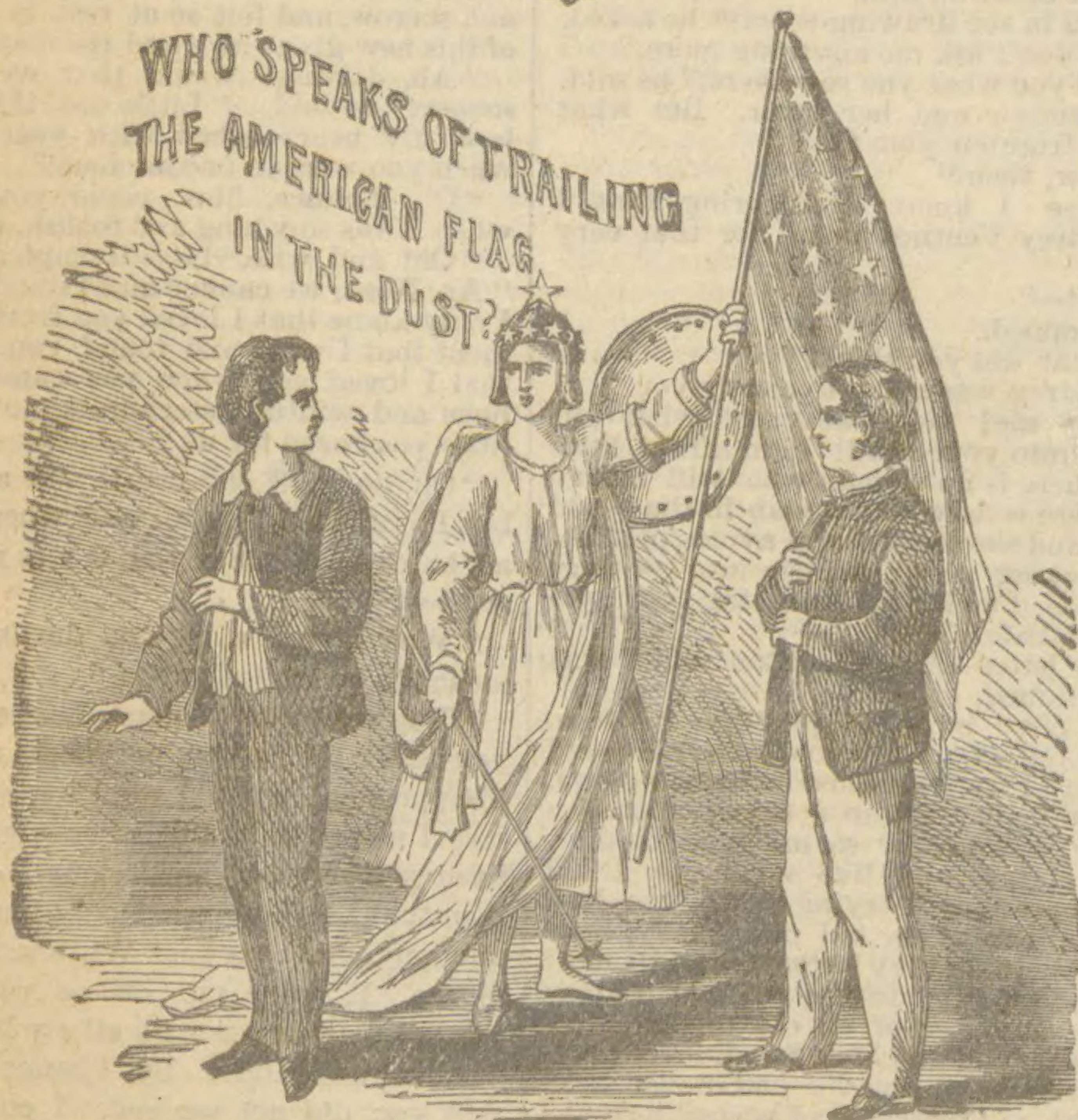
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